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THE PHANTOM LIGHT-HOUSE; or, "BLACK ROCK," THE SMUGGLER SPY.

ROGER STARBUCK,

AUTHOR OF "THE BOY CAPTAIN," "THE BLACK SCHOONER," "FIRE HEELS," "THE GOLDEN HARPOON," ETC., ETC., ETC.



THE YOUNG SMUGGLERS UTTERED A CRY OF SUPERSTITIOUS TERROR. REVEALED FOR A FEW SECONDS, IN A TRANSIENT, LURID GLEAM OF SUNLIGHT, THERE IT WAS AGAIN—THAT WONDERFUL PHANTOM LIGHT-HOUSE.

The Phantom Light-house;

OR,

"Black Rock," the Smuggler Spy.

BY ROGER STARBUCK,

AUTHOR OF "BIG HORN IKE," "FIRE-HEELS,"
"THE GOLDEN HARPOON," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A FOE.

"WHAT are you doing here, boy? Is this the way you attend to your master's business?"

The tone and manner of the speaker were haughty and insolent to young Robert Brown—the person he addressed—a fine-looking American youth of seventeen—one of the clerks employed by John Carlos, shipping goods merchant of New York. Carlos was a wealthy Spaniard, who, besides his residence in this city, had a beautiful home in Mexico, about ninety miles north of Tampico, to which he sometimes resorted. Having also a storage agency near Tampico, he usually took young Brown with him to his Southern mansion, to there look over the accounts on piles of ledgers, which often were sent to him from the warehouse.

On the day of which we write the boy had been told by his employer that he might have a holiday of ten hours, and he had then strolled along the bank of the Santander river, which swept past the extensive grounds of the Carlos mansion. Finally he had noticed seated under a tree, on the river-shore, the merchant's daughter, Isabel—a beautiful brunette of fifteen.

Instantly, on seeing this lovely vision, he had paused, and taken a position behind a clump of shrubbery, through an opening in which he could watch the girl without her observing him. He had seen her many times before, and on several occasions she had spoken to him. To tell the truth, he loved and admired her; but he had been careful not to make this known, for, besides his having received no encouragement from her, he knew that Carlos, who was a proud man, would be indignant and would discharge him at once, were he to even guess at his poor clerk's sentiments toward his daughter.

While he stood behind the shrubbery, several hundreds of feet from the maiden, observing her round, lithe form and lovely face, some one touched him on the shoulder, and turning, he beheld Captain Philip Cardinas, who commanded a small, armed Mexican sloop—a cruiser against the smugglers that sometimes ran up the coast.

Cardinas was about twenty—a slender young man of dark complexion, who might have been handsome, but for the uneasy, shifting glances of his black eyes. He had known John Carlos and his daughter since he was a mere child, and Brown had not unfrequently seen him walking out with Isabel. He had never before this noticed the lad, except by a brief supercilious glance; but now, as he put the question, he looked at him fiercely and intently.

The youth at first was so surprised by the words of the speaker that he made no reply.

"Come, answer me," repeated the captain, sternly. "What are you doing here, neglecting your master's business?"

Robert's eyes flashed.

"I would advise you to mind your own and not to speak to me in that way," he replied. "We Americans are not used to having our employers spoken of as our masters!"

"Be careful there, fellow! you forget who you are speaking to. I am of the *Cardinas family!* Bear that in mind, and apologize to me at once."

"No, I do not forget that I am speaking to a fellow named Cardinas. Americans do not apologize to people on account of their rank or family."

"Impudent rascal, beg my pardon, or I'll flog it out of you!"

And he raised a small cane he held, as if intending to bring it down across the boy's back.

Robert instantly pulled the cane from his grasp and broke it in two.

"Miserable little whelp! you shall have a thrashing all the same!" cried the Spaniard.

He grasped him by the throat, but ere he could strike him, the lad dealt him between the eyes a well-directed blow, which nearly stunned him, causing him to let go his hold.

"Furies!" shouted the other, as soon as he could speak. "You shall suffer for this!"

Just then a shriek from Isabel diverted the attention of the two disputants, and both saw the girl struggling in the current of the river, which was bearing her further from them every moment.

They ran swiftly along the bank, and, when opposite to the imperiled maiden, Cardinas threw himself upon a log, drifting near the shore, and, pushing it before him, swam toward the young lady, who, having risen after sinking, was about going down for the second time. Robert, who had kept on a few yards further than his companion, leaped far into the river, and, striking out vigorously, was fortunate enough to head the girl off, and seize her as she was again sinking, while Cardinas was still some yards distant. Putting a hand under her shoulder, the boy raised her face above the surface.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "I will save you. The tide will help us to the rock, only a few fathoms off, and the water between that and the bank is shallow enough for wading."

But Isabel could not hear him; she had fainted.

A few minutes later Robert reached the rock and got upon it with his lovely burden in his arms. Heedless of the shouts of Cardinas for him to await his coming, he forded the water, gained the bank, and moved on with the senseless girl toward the mansion. As the weight was heavy for a lad of his years, he was soon obliged to pause to rest. He laid Isabel on the ground, and, at the same time, catching sight of a smelling-bottle, which had dropped from her pocket, a few yards behind him, he ran to obtain it, hoping to thus restore his charge to her senses.

Just as he turned, Cardinas, who had come up, emerged from the shrubbery through which he had been running, lifted the girl, and hastened on with her toward the house.

Looking behind him at Robert, he called out:

"I am not done with you, yet! I am going to make you suffer for the blow you gave me!"

As he spoke some servants were seen approaching from the mansion.

They assisted the young captain to convey Isabel into the house. She was placed upon a lounge, and, restoratives being applied, she opened her eyes, just as her father came into the room.

"My child—" he began, anxiously, when Cardinas seized his hand.

"She is coming to," he interrupted, "pray, don't excite yourself."

"Thank God!" cried Don Carlos. "To you, then, from what I have heard, I am indebted for the life of my daughter!"

Cardinas bowed.

"It was fortunate," he said, "that I happened to be on the bank. The first notice I received of Isabel's peril was her shriek, uttered probably at the moment she fell into the river!"

"You have acted nobly," said Don Carlos. "Depend upon it I shall never forget the great service you have rendered me, and," he added, lowering his voice, "I shall not fail to speak of it to Isabel."

Again Cardinas bowed, and looked grateful, while he inwardly exulted at the fortunate turn which affairs had taken.

"Isabel probably was too far gone, when that boy reached her, to know who it was that saved her life," he thought. "Therefore I will get the credit of having rescued her, as the servants did not see the little ruffian at all, but only me as I approached with the girl in my arms. This will win me great favor in her eyes. There is nothing like a bold rescue to touch the heart of a woman!"

Isabel was soon sufficiently recovered to tell how she came to fall into the river. She had reached too far over the edge of a bank to pluck a flower she saw there, and had lost her balance.

"Excepting a slight headache, I now feel as well as ever," she remarked, in response to her father's anxious look.

Then she arose and left the room to change her attire.

The moment she was gone, Cardinas turned to Don Carlos:

"You have a clerk here—a little ruffian named Brown!"

"I employ a boy of that name," answered the merchant, looking surprised.

"I think you would discharge him if you knew his true character."

"Discharge Brown? Why, I have always found the boy good and faithful to me."

"The fellow imposes on you. He is at this moment lounging on the river bank, instead of attending to his duty."

"You are mistaken, Philip. I gave him a holiday."

"Oh, did you? Well then of course that is all right so far, but I don't think you would like to hear that I caught him watching your daughter from behind a clump of shrubbery, in a very impudent manner."

Don Carlos frowned; then he smiled.

"Oh, as to that," he said, "you know he is a mere boy. I have no objection to his admiring Isabel—at a distance."

"Have you not? Well, I did not like his looks, and I merely requested him to move aside to let me pass, when the little rascal had the audacity to call me 'fellow,' in a way which made me angry. I raised my cane and would have given him a flogging had not your daughter's shriek at that moment diverted my attention."

"You mean to say that he had the impudence to insult a friend of mine?"

"He did so, and more than that, he doubled up his fist, and would, I have no doubt, have struck me, had I attempted to thrash him."

"I will speak to him about this, and induce him to apologize to you."

The young captain's eyes twinkled. He knew that Brown would not consent to do this, and he also knew enough of Don Carlos to feel sure that he would discharge the lad from his employ for refusing.

"The fellow will probably tell you some lies about the affair," continued Cardinas. "He would readily do so, I have no doubt, for the sake of retaining his situation."

The merchant looked thoughtful. He had always found Brown honest and faithful, but he was of a suspicious nature, and the words of the captain had their effect.

Cardinas, soon after, departed to repair to his vessel, the St. Mary by name, anchored near the mouth of the river.

CHAPTER II.

A SURPRISE.

A SHORT time after the young captain was gone, Don Carlos sent for Robert Brown to come to the apartment which he used as a sort of office in his mansion. By the time he arrived, the boy's clothing had dried, and showed no traces of his late manful struggle to save Isabel.

The moment he entered the room, the lad was surprised by the stern look on his employer's face.

"Strange he should look at me in that way," he thought, "after I have saved his daughter from drowning."

"Robert," said the merchant, "I learn that you have insulted Captain Cardinas, one of my best friends."

"On the contrary, sir, he insulted me. I merely defended myself."

"Silence! the captain would not lie."

"What did he tell you, sir?"

"It does not matter. You insulted him by calling him names without provocation."

"If he told you that, he lied," replied Robert, boldly.

Then he went on to give a frank and truthful account of the whole affair.

"You see, sir, I did not 'punch' him until he took hold of me," the lad continued.

"Your account differs from his," said Don Carlos. "You were too hasty. I have always found you faithful and industrious, but there are other boys equally so, and unless you are willing to apologize to the captain, you must leave my employ. Take your choice."

"I will then have to leave you, sir," answered Robert, "for I will not apologize for defending myself."

"Here," said Don Carlos, taking out his pocket-book, "is your salary for this month, which ends to-morrow."

Robert bitterly regretted the unfortunate affair which had brought about his dismissal, for Don Carlos paid him good wages.

Moreover, on leaving his employer, he would probably never again see the merchant's beautiful daughter.

Having taken the amount due him, he repaired to his room and proceeded to pack up his clothing. He had not been gone a minute, when Isabel, who had changed her dress, entered her father's room.

The merchant's grave face lighted up at once.

"Glad enough I am you were saved," he said. "How can we ever repay him for the gallant deed?" he continued, smiling, not without much satisfaction, as he noticed the blush which overspread the girl's cheeks. Cardinas,

besides belonging to a good family, was the son of a wealthy planter, who would eventually bequeath to him a large fortune, and the merchant would have been glad to see the youth become the husband of his child.

"It was a noble deed," said Isabel. "He is slender, and it must have been very hard for him to hold me and swim at the same time."

"That is true." After a thoughtful silence, he continued:

"Isabel, I—I—think I am not mistaken. You like this young fellow?"

"Like him?" said the girl, opening her eyes wide with surprise at the question.

"Why—yes. You need not be alarmed. I have no objection. He is both handsome and noble."

"Father, what do you mean? Of course I have never thought of *him*, in that way, and I am naturally surprised that you should."

"Why surprised? He is handsome, brave, and of good family."

"Of whom are you speaking, father?" inquired Isabel.

"What a singular question—I allude to Captain Cardinas, of course!"

"Then you have been talking of one person and I of another," cried the young girl, laughing merrily.

Don Carlos stared.

"I have been speaking of the young fellow who saved your life—of Captain Cardinas."

"It was not the captain who saved my life—it was Robert Brown!"

"Robert Brown? Why, Cardinas said, or, at least, permitted me to say that he rescued you."

"That was dishonest on his part. That he tried to rescue me, I know, for I saw him endeavoring to swim to me, but it was Brown who reached and saved me. I was conscious long enough to see and recognize him. Cardinas was too far off to even render him any assistance. I cannot imagine why he should pretend—"

"Mind, I do not say he told me he rescued you; only he—he—did not deny it, nor did he make any mention of the boy, Brown."

Isabel's lip curled.

"I never thought him particularly honest," she said, "and now I am sure he is not."

"You must not let such things influence you. Doubtless it was the interest he takes in you which made him use a little deception. It is excusable in a young fellow of his age."

"Is it? I differ with you, father; but let us say no more about him. What are you going to do for Robert Brown?"

Don Carlos colored.

"Well, really, I suppose he does deserve some sort of recompense."

"I will tell you what to do," said Isabel, putting an arm about her parent's neck, and looking with a bright smile straight into his eyes.

"Well, what?"

"Double his wages."

"Impossible."

"Why?"

"Because he will no longer be in my employ. Three minutes ago I paid him what was due, and discharged him!"

"Discharged the boy who saved your daughter's life?"

"I did not know it at the time."

"Why did you discharge him?"

Don Carlos informed her, giving both the captain's and Brown's version of the story.

"And you believed the captain?"

"I did and do."

"Well, I do not. It is Robert Brown who tells the truth. Come, father, call him back. We have detected Cardinas in one falsehood, and of course he would therefore tell more."

"As he has saved your life, I will reinstate him in his place; for, as I said, he deserves some recompense, and I will also increase his wages."

"I think it best to say nothing to him about your reason for doing so, as, in that case, he would be sure to refuse the increase."

"Upon my word, you seem to know this boy pretty well!"

Isabel colored slightly.

"One can read him almost at a glance," she replied.

"Well, I will have to hit upon some pretext, especially after the way I served him. The fact is," he added, after a moment's reflection, "I have long thought of sending him to try and investigate the mysterious theft of my goods at the Tampico warehouse. I will send him there on this mission, and tell him that, as it is a harder and more perilous duty than I have hitherto required of him, I will increase his salary."

"Could you not think of some other plan, father? As you say, it will be a perilous task. Remember, you have already sent on that errand two persons who have mysteriously disappeared."

"Yes, Henrique and Jason—two of my clerks. I imagine, however, that they were drowned, as they went out boating together, instead of attending to their duty, as they should have done. They were last seen in a skiff, just as a fog was coming up."

"I know there was a report to that effect, but I have always thought," she added, with a shudder, "that they were murdered."

"Pooh! I don't think so."

Isabel tried to persuade her father not to send Brown on the errand he had spoken of, but all to no purpose.

"Brown is careful and prudent," he said, "as well as courageous, and he is just the person I can rely on for this business."

The young girl withdrew, and Don Carlos lost no time in sending for the boy.

The moment he entered, the merchant said to him:

"I have concluded, after all, to retain you in my employ, if you are willing to stay."

"I should only be too glad to stay, if you do not ask me to—"

"No, no," interrupted the other, "we will say no more about your apologizing to Cardinas. My principal reason for keeping you is because I have just thought of something—a task for you, which I would scarcely trust to any other person. As it is a harder and perhaps, a more perilous one than I have ever required of you, I will, from this moment, increase your salary fifty per cent."

Robert stared. He could scarcely credit his good fortune. The pleasure depicted on his face pleased his employer.

"The question is," he continued, "whether you are willing to undertake the duty I would require you to perform. You are aware that, for several years past, my warehouse at Tampico has frequently been robbed. How it is done is a mystery to me, as well as to my agent there, who has good watchmen posted both inside and outside of the premises. Well, I am going to send you to try and ferret out this mystery. It may be perilous work, but I think I can rely on you."

"I will do my best," answered Robert. "I shall be glad and willing to go."

"You can then prepare at once to set out in the morning. I will furnish you with a good revolver, and also with funds for your maintenance while in the city. First, on your arrival, you will take a letter to my agent, Leon Rupo, who will give you a packet of money, which you will immediately send on to me by express. He will receive the money just before you reach the warehouse, so that he will be ready to hand it over to you. As it is a large sum, I would not like to trust Rupo with it, for I believe the thieves have spies to watch him, as he has been twice waylaid and robbed of cash he was going to send to me."

"So I have heard, sir," answered Robert.

"Of course the robbers will not know of your having the money, and therefore I can rely upon its safe arrival."

Having given his young clerk further instructions, he dismissed him to prepare for his journey.

On the following morning the lad set out, taking passage aboard of a schooner which would land him within a few miles of the city.

At four o'clock P.M. the schooner, which was a fishing craft, dropped anchor off the coast a league above Tampico, and Robert was taken ashore in a boat.

As he was passing a rock, after leaving the boat, on his way to the city, he beheld a youth of his own age crouched behind a ridge, where, with a spy-glass, he had evidently been watching the schooner from which the merchant's clerk had landed.

The moment the two saw each other, Robert recognized him as John Lormo—a young fellow employed as a custom-house detective at Tampico. As he had often met Lormo at the custom-house, when he went there on business with his employer, the boys had become acquainted.

"Haloo!" cried Lormo, who was a small but resolute-looking young Mexican, "me much glad see you. Where you come from—from him schoon?"

And he pointed toward the craft.

"Yes. I am going to Tampico."

"Good; me go there too, now. Been watch schoon'. Think might be smuggleum, but see now only fish catcher. Plenty smuggleum been go on of late."

"I should think Captain Cardinas, with his craft, ought to prevent that."

"Only one vessel not enough. Somehow him smuggle git past him."

The two boys, journeying on, were soon near the warehouse, which was within a stone's throw of the city. Here Robert parted from his companion, after which he entered the building.

It was a large, stone house, which had once been an abandoned convent. It stood near the edge of a pier, that projected into the water. The structure was almost a ruin, when Don Carlos purchased it and fitted it up for a warehouse.

Entering it, Robert ascended a flight of steps and passed into the office of Leon Rupo, the agent.

The latter, a Spaniard with a thin, swarthy face and keen, black eyes, read the letter delivered to him.

"If you hurry, you will be in time for the six o'clock express," he said, as he gave Robert a package, directed to Don Carlos. "Be careful and let no one see this except the express-agent."

"You can depend on me," answered the youth, as he deposited the package in an inside pocket of his coat.

He then hurried off toward the city.

On the way he was obliged to pass a gully, half-concealed by thick masses of shrubbery. He fancied, as he moved on, that he heard a slight rustling in the shrubbery, and turning quickly, he beheld a swarthy face, surmounted by a broad-rimmed hat. He also caught the gleam of a pair of glittering eyes, and fancied he could detect the flash of a knife.

"No you don't!" he cried, drawing his revolver and facing about.

The person, whomever he was, had evidently intended to steal upon him from behind, and stab him with his knife, but, finding himself discovered, he sprung backward, and soon disappeared in the underbrush.

Robert hurried on, keeping a good lookout on all sides of him as he went.

He finally reached the express building, but he there found everything in confusion. The house had taken fire, and vain efforts were being made to put out the flames. On inquiry, he learned that nothing could be sent by the company for several days.

He then repaired to a lodging-house, and having hired a room, he locked himself in the apartment, and carefully sewed the valuable package in the inside lining of his vest.

CHAPTER III.

THE CAPTURE.

HAVING partaken of a frugal repast, Robert set out for the warehouse.

"We will see what sort of a watch they keep there," he muttered.

He took a different direction from that in which he had come to go to the express office. On reaching the building he found that Rupo had gone home for the day, and had left his watchman in charge of the place.

There were four men in all, two of whom were posted outside—one on the pier and another at the front of the structure. The others were inside. All the doors except one were barred and bolted. The moment Robert appeared at the one which was unfastened, a stout man, with a pistol in one hand came forward, and gruffly asked him what he wanted.

"I am going to sleep in the warehouse tonight," said the boy.

"No. What is your name?"

"Robert Brown."

"All right, then. The agent told me to let no one in except you. If you came, you were to be allowed to come in, but he said nothing about your sleeping here."

"He can have no objection," answered the boy, as he entered. He found himself in a large, long room, in which was packed a miscellaneous assortment of goods. The apartment now contained but one large lamp, which afforded only a dim light. "I see a door at the other end of the room," said Robert.

"Yes, that opens upon another storage-place," was the answer. "There is a watchman there, too."

"There are other storage-rooms in the building, are there not?"

"Yes, up-stairs."

"And is there no watchman there?"

"No, because to reach them any person would have to pass through the room in which is the watchman. The stairway leads up from that room."

"I will go and look at it."

The Phantom Light-house.

The man scowled.

"I know you are one of the merchant's clerks, but that does not give you authority to come here and interfere with us. We understand our business."

"Don Carlos gave me orders to come here, if I wanted to, and look into things."

"Oh, he did—eh? Well, why didn't you say so before, youngster. Of course that alters the case."

Robert moved forward to the door, opened it, and entered the room, which he found lighted like the other one. As he appeared rather suddenly before the surprised watcher there, he detected a suspicious-looking bottle, which the man was thrusting hastily into the breast pocket of his coat.

"Ho! ho!" thought the boy. "So this fellow takes his bitters while on duty!"

"It's all right, Antolo," cried the other watchman, putting his head through the doorway. "This young man is one of Don Carlos's clerks."

"You have no right to drink, while you are on watch," said Robert to the person with the bottle.

"Me rheumatiz," was the reply. "Me never much take—only a little."

As he spoke, however, he staggered, and the boy could not help observing that his nose and his eyes were very red.

He looked carefully around him.

"Is the door through which I came the only one opening upon this room?" he inquired.

"Oh! of course. Him only one door."

Robert went up the stairway and entered a room above. Here there was also a dim light. The apartment was one of several in this part of the lofty building.

"It is true that no one could come here without passing the watchman below," thought the boy. "It is plain that the fellow gets drunk, but the other man appears to be steady and sober. In fact, I have heard the agent speak of him as a good, reliable person. It is a mystery, therefore, how any robber could enter without being seen by him."

Hours passed. Robert resolved to remain awake all night. He kept a vigilant lookout, moving from room to room above, and now and then going down-stairs to see how the watchmen were conducting themselves.

It was about midnight, and the youth was walking to and fro in one of the upper rooms, when he fancied he heard a slight creaking noise in the stone wall, against which some valuable goods were piled.

He instantly concealed himself in a large, empty cask, over which he placed a piece of canvas, picked up from the floor.

The open bung-hole of the cask afforded him a view of that part of the wall in which he had heard the mysterious noise. He kept his gaze upon it, and finally, to his surprise, he saw one of the squares of stone above the pile of goods swing noiselessly back, revealing an opening at which a dark, swarthy face now appeared!

This face, dimly lighted, was evidently that of a Mexican youth of seventeen years. A fierce, desperate-looking visage it was, with bright, flashing black eyes, a low forehead, thin lips, and long black hair, the latter streaming down from under a broad-rimmed Spanish sombrero.

The fellow thrust his head through the opening, took a careful survey of the store room, and then sprung lightly in on top of the piled goods. He had a lithe, active figure, and wore loose, sailor-like trowsers, confined about the waist with a sash.

Kneeling, he turned and silently beckoned, as if to some other person or persons, and the next moment half a dozen men in semi-nautical attire sprung through the opening and joined the youth, who had now descended to the floor.

Upon one of these fellows the gaze of Robert was riveted with the closest attention, for he felt almost sure that in spite of a light cloak he wore and which partly concealed his face and form, he could recognize Captain Cardinas.

This person pointed to the door, which one of the men now cautiously shut and locked.

Then the Mexican youth whom the boy had first seen said something in a low voice, and all the persons there except the one Robert believed to be Cardinas, who sprung back through the opening after taking a careful survey of the room, commenced to help themselves to the most valuable of the goods and to pass them through the secret aperture to confederates who were there to receive them.

"Ho! ho!" thought the concealed boy. "How finely it is all done! There must of course be some secret entrance outside leading to a hidden stairway, by means of which these rascals have

come up. The mystery is solved at last and now, then, for putting a stop to the sport."

His intention was to spring from the cask, give the alarm to the watchmen below, and with them, rush outside to head off the robbers.

He had not taken two steps, however, after leaving the cask, ere he was seen, when the whole party, with drawn knives, bounded toward him, and from their position, got between him and the door.

"No noise!" said the young leader, his eyes blazing like those of a wolf, "or me quick blow out brains!"

And as he spoke he pointed a pistol at the boy.

Robert drew his revolver and at the same time, resolved to do his duty, was about to shout an alarm, when something descending on his head laid him senseless.

The person whom the lad had supposed to be Cardinas had returned through the opening and it was he who struck down the youth with a blow from the pommel of his sword. As he looked at the prostrate lad his face, fully revealed, was shown to really be that of the St. Mary's captain.

Half a dozen knives were instantly raised above the fallen youth, but Cardinas prevented the blows from being dealt.

"No, he must not be killed here," he cried. "Take him to your craft, Pedro," he added, turning to the young leader, "and then—"

He smiled meaningly, instead of finishing the sentence.

"Ay, he shall go to keep company with the merchant's other two spies—Henrique and Jason," said Pedro.

"Good," replied Cardinas, "better so, than for his blood to stain this floor. There must be no clew to his disappearance."

"Three men are enough to take him away, for he is not heavy," continued Pedro.

The hands and feet of the senseless boy were securely fastened with cords; then he was carried off by three of the men, who passed with him, through the opening, while the others remained to continue their plundering.

There was a light, secret staircase in a hollow space between the thick walls of the building, and down this the outlaws descended with their burden.

There were about twenty steps leading to a water-cave to the left of the pier. The bottom step of the staircase was, in fact, merely a rugged shelf on one side of the rock, concealed by long, flowing weeds. The outlaws had only to roll a boulder over the opening above it to conceal the existence of the secret stairway.

The convent having, in fact, been built at a time when the Spaniards were at war not only with the fierce natives of the country but were also threatened with attacks from French buccaneers, doubtless had other hidden ways of egress and ingress besides those just described.

In the cave, which opened directly upon the sea, was a large boat, containing the goods which had already been conveyed to it from above. There were several men in the boat. The three who bore Robert laid him aft, near the stern sheets, and, in a whisper, explained about his capture to the others in the vessel.

Then they returned to the store-room, where they assisted their companions to remove some more goods from the apartment.

When they had nearly loaded the boat with as many of the stolen things as it could bear, they pulled the vessel seaward, having first left Cardinas on shore.

"Don't fail to drown that accursed boy!" whispered the St. Mary's captain to Pedro, ere he parted from him.

"Me see to him," answered the other in English. "Take him out near 'Black Rocks,' where me sure he never can come up again."

"Would it not be as well to tie a weight to him, and throw him out of the boat when you are a few fathoms from the shore?"

"No; 'fraid rope part when fish gnaw with teeth, and him body come up again. Out at 'Black Rocks' plenty shark come soon, and nothing of him left!"

And as he spoke, Pedro grinned, showing his white teeth.

"Perhaps you are right. So long as you make away with the rascal, I don't care how you do it, but be sure and drown him, for it is likely he saw me in the store-room with you, and of course, if he should get away, he would tell Don Carlos!"

"Never fear; him not get away from sharks," replied Pedro with a horrid laugh.

A quarter of an hour later the boat was pulled alongside of a small sloop, lying about half a league from the shore.

CHAPTER IV.

BERTA.

"WHERE is Berta?" was Pedro's first question to his mate, as he came and looked over the gangway.

The mate, an English youth of twenty, named Bronson, answered rather sullenly:

"She's in the cabin, just now. She made me take this watch on deck, although it ain't my turn."

"Never mind. Whatever she order you do, you must do. That was the agreement we been make with you when me ship you. Berta is my own sister, as me have told you, and she is as good a sailor as me. Me hope she stay in cabin, though, till we get near 'Black Rocks,' for me got some one here to make food for sharks, and you know Berta was never for killing. You remember what trouble we had with her, when we went to thr w Henrique and Jason in water."

"Ay, I don't think I'll be likely to forget it. She fastened her nails in my face, as I was flinging one of the boys over, and I have the scars yet!"

He then called the men of the watch, a few of whom proceeded to take from the boat the plundered property, while others lifted Robert to the deck.

The boy was recovering his senses as he was carried aboard. He opened his eyes, when he was laid on deck, and stared wonderingly at the evil faces faintly revealed to his gaze in the dim light.

"Who are you? Where am I?" he inquired, as Pedro bent over him.

"You ask too many question. You know where you are, bum-by."

The youth attempted to rise, when he perceived that his ankles and his arms were tied.

Suddenly the memory of the robbers in the warehouse flashed upon his mind, and he at once realized that he was in the power of the thieves.

"What are you going to do with me?" he said, as he was now raised and borne into the hold.

The men did not answer. They placed him on the floor, returned to the deck, and fastened the hatches over him.

"There," said Bronson, who had superintended this task, "I don't believe your sister has a shadow of a suspicion that we have that fellow in limbo."

Pedro, to whom he spoke, looked well pleased.

"We must keep it secret from her, till after we throw boy overboard," he said.

Bronson was about to reply when Pedro laid a hand on his arm.

"Hist! here she come!" he whispered.

In fact a light step was heard, approaching from the direction of the cabin, and the next moment Berta appeared.

Seen by the light of the sloop's lantern, which, as the vessel sped upon her way, had been hung up in the rigging aft, the girl was shown to be about sixteen, of tall stature, but well formed and graceful, with a wealth of black tresses sweeping over her shoulders, dark eyes, and a firm, self-reliant cast of countenance. Although of masculine nature, so far as courage and many of her tastes were concerned, yet she was a person of strong, womanly feeling.

Her face, of the brunette type, was beautiful, and the hardy sort of life to which she had been trained as her brother's assistant, had given her splendid health.

"So the load has come off," she said, glancing at some of the things, which had not yet been taken below. "Did you make a good haul, Pedro?"

"Yes, I did."

Berta laughed, showing her white teeth.

At the same moment a pitch of the vessel caused the girl to stagger, and Bronson, who was near, stretched out a hand, as if to save her from falling.

She pushed his arm violently away.

"I want none of your help to keep me up!" she cried. "I'm as good a sailor as you are, any day!"

The mate shrugged his shoulders and walked off.

Pedro laughed at his repulse.

"I hate that fellow, and I wish he would never come near me," said Berta, in English.

"He is a good man, at any rate, and we can depend on him, for he escape from prison, and, if he leave us, he be caught and hung."

"It was a brutal murder," continued the girl, shuddering. "To think of his killing a defenseless Indian child, just to possess himself of a gold bracelet she wore."

"You think too much of such things," answered Pedro, "too much for a smuggler and robber."

"We can smuggle and rob without killing! Where are the rest of the goods?—in the hold?"

"Ye—yes," stammered Pedro.

"I will take a lantern, and go down to look at them."

"Better wait till morning," said Pedro, who knew that if Berta entered the hold she would discover the prisoner there. "You can see better then."

The girl directed toward her brother a quick, flashing glance. Evidently her suspicions were aroused.

"I will go now," she answered decidedly.

Pedro threw himself before her, and was trying to frame some excuse for her not to go, when she pushed him so violently that he fell down.

"Hah! she very devil!" muttered the youth, as he rose.

Meanwhile Berta, procuring a lantern, entered the hold, fastening the door in the bulkhead behind her, so that she might not be intruded upon, for she knew Pedro had some reason for not wanting her here, and she was resolved to fathom the secret.

She had not taken many steps when she came upon Robert, lying, bound hand and foot, on his back. The boy's light brown hair having fallen away from his forehead, revealed, just above his left temple, the contusion from the blow he had received.

"What a handsome young fellow," mentally exclaimed the girl, the moment she could recover from her surprise.

Then she advanced near enough for him to see her, and meet the gaze of his blue eyes.

"You have been hurt," she said, gazing down at the cut on his forehead. "How came you here?"

She knew very well that he must have been brought here by her brother, but she wanted to learn all she could.

Robert then related to her what he could remember of the affair in the warehouse.

The girl's eyes flashed indignantly. She stooped down, and picking up a cup of water lying on a barrel near, she proceeded to bathe the boy's wound. As she again met the gaze of his eyes, she felt attracted to him more than she had ever before been to any human being.

She unfastened the lashings from his feet, and as she helped him rise, she was about to conduct him to the cabin, when the hatch above opened and Pedro sprung down into the hold.

"Enough of this nonsense," he cried. "Why have you freed that boy?"

Berta sprung between her brother and the prisoner, her eyes flashing.

"I will not have him harmed," she said, resolutely. "You would serve him as you did Henrique and Jason!"

"Come, now, who command here? You or I?"

"I have my right here, as well as you. I am part owner of the craft!"

"Don't be a fool, Berta! If you let that boy go, it is all up with us. He is one of Don Carlos's clerks, and he saw us rob the warehouse!"

"I did not say I meant to let him go, but I do mean to prevent your murdering him."

"We see about that," cried Pedro, and, as quick as thought, he pulled a pistol, which he was about to aim at the youth, over the shoulder of the girl, when the latter seized his arm.

"Hold!" she cried, firmly. "If ever you kill that boy, you and I will be enemies hereafter, and, as true as there is a God above us I will betray you and your band, and our hiding-place to the authorities!"

Her eyes literally blazed, and her womanly voice rung like an organ through the vessel, as she thus spoke.

Pedro cowered before her, for no person knew her temper, when she was aroused, better than he.

"What do you mean to do with him then?"

"We can keep him with us. Perhaps we may induce him to join our band."

"I will never do that," answered Robert, firmly.

"Silence!" cried Berta, turning her magnificent black eyes upon the youth, but her voice now was not at all stern. "You may think differently, after awhile."

"I'm sure I never will!"

"You hear him," said Pedro. "Come, Berty, this is fool work. Besides, Cardinas told me to be sure to make way with him," he added, in a whisper.

"I don't care for Cardinas," she replied, also

in a whisper. "He need not know that the boy is with us. He does not often come to our rendezvous, and when he does, it will be easy enough to keep the prisoner out of his sight."

Pedro turned, and sullenly left the hold.

As soon as he was gone, Robert said to her:

"You will help me to escape! We are not far from land. I think I could swim ashore, if you would let me drop overboard."

Then Berta smiled upon him.

"You could not swim so far. We are more than a league from land, and the current would be partly against you. Come with me."

She conducted him into the cabin and gave him wine and refreshments. She appeared to take great pleasure in seeing him eat. When he had finished, she opened the door of a neat little room, and pointed to a berth.

"You need rest. Go there and sleep," she said, gently.

The moment he had entered the room, she closed and locked the door.

It was her own bed which she had given up to him. She resolved to watch by the door to prevent her brother, or any of his crew from harming the boy.

CHAPTER V.

THE SPY.

ABOUT the time Robert entered the warehouse, the boy Lormo, with four men, all wearing thick pea-jackets, were pulling a boat past Pedro's sloop, which, as stated, lay at anchor half a league from the shore. Three or four men aboard the craft were leaning over the rail, with fishing-lines in the water.

"Ahoy! there!" shouted Lormo. "What luck?"

"Not much yet," answered Bronson, who was one of the men with lines.

"Hah! hah! fisherman's luck! Don't think you get much here," said Lormo, laughing. "We go fish, too, but we going further out!"

"Well, good luck to you," said Bronson.

The boat was kept on, for Lormo had no suspicion of the sloop's true character.

In fact this craft, the Maria by name, often seen off the coast, was supposed to be merely an innocent fishing-craft, as Pedro and his sister frequently brought to Tampico a cargo of fish. The young people, well known to the custom-house officers, always paid for any merchandise which at any time they brought to the dock with them, and were therefore supposed to be strictly honest in this respect.

Lormo and his companions kept on until the boat was about two leagues from land, when they dropped anchor behind a mass of rugged rocks that rose a little above the surface of the sea.

Gradually the gloom of night closed about them. Then they got out upon the rocks and crouched behind a ledge where they lay for a long time peering into the darkness.

"Here she comes!" whispered Lormo, speaking of course in Spanish, as his companions were all Mexicans.

The men slightly elevated their heads to behold the dim outline of a small sloop.

"How do you know she is the one?"

"By the shape of her mainsail. See! it is the very one our spy described as belonging to the suspected craft. I'll wager she now has the cargo she is going to smuggle in on this very night! Quick! Now is our time."

All entered the boat and Lormo crouched down in the stern-sheets under some canvas by which his small figure was well concealed.

The others pulled out from behind the rocks and one of them instantly hailed the craft.

"Ahoy! What sloop is that?"

"The fishing-sloop WINHO, bound in to Tampico!"

"Lie to and let us board you!"

A gruff oath, not intended to be heard was uttered by the person who had answered the hail.

"Who are you, and what do you want to come aboard for? We are in a hurry and can't stop!"

At the same moment the sloop came shooting on swiftly and would have passed the boat had not one of the men therein flashed a lantern, which showed three companions with revolvers pointed toward the saucy skipper.

"Heave-to, in the name of the law!" cried one of the party.

"Custom-house officers! Why didn't you say so before?" growled the captain.

Then the canvas rattled as his craft swung up into the wind, and in another minute the boat was fast alongside with a rope, and all its occupants except Lormo, who remained hidden, were aboard.

"Come, now, what do you want of me—a poor fisherman?" inquired the captain.

"How is it you showed no light?" said one of the visitors.

"Because my lantern is out of order, and I must have it repaired before I can burn more oil in it."

"Hah! Well, please to let me see your cargo."

"I have none, at present; but I should think you might tell by the smell what it has been, unless your noses are stopped up."

"You will find that our eyes are not stopped, at any rate," was the answer. "Off with that hatch, and let us see what is below there."

The captain ordered a man to take off the hatch, and the officers sprung into the hold. This was found to contain nothing except some empty barrels, some coils of rigging, etc. The cabin was next examined, and afterward the forecastle.

Meanwhile, while the attention of the crew was directed toward the officers, Lormo had clambered about with the agility of a cat, and had dropped into the hold.

He got into an empty barrel, behind some coils of rigging.

"Now, then, we will see what else besides the smell of fish the little Winho will take into Tampico to-night," he muttered.

"Well," the captain at length said to the officers, "are you satisfied? I don't think you'll again trouble yourself about a poor fisher."

"We may often do so. Of late we have heard that, in spite of Captain Cardinas's craft, a good deal of smuggling is going on. One vessel is not enough to guard against that business."

"Right there," said the captain, his eyes twinkling. "It seems to me that Cardinas lies too near the coast, as he even now is doing, not half a league below the city. We passed him far enough off in the dark for him not to see us."

"Ay, ay! there should have been another Government vessel further out."

With these words the speaker, followed by his companions, descended into his boat. A minute later the Winho was speeding on her way, her captain having no suspicion that a young custom-house detective was secreted in his hold.

Lormo in the barrel disposed himself as comfortably as possible. His short stature and slender limbs enabled him to sit down in his quarters and rest his elbows on his knees.

About an hour had passed when he heard a rough hail on deck, and by the noise which followed he knew that the sloop had met another craft, and was being hove to. He cautiously emerged from the barrel, and standing on a pile of rigging, pressed one ear against the hatch.

"You are here in good time," was said, in a voice which he could not hear plainly enough to recognize, but which in reality was that of Pedro.

"Yes," answered the other captain. "I suppose you have the goods ready for me to take?"

"I have. Land them in the usual place below the city, and there you'll find a wagon to take them to —."

Lormo could not hear the name, which was spoken in a low voice.

The noise made by bales and boxes being transferred from one vessel to the other was now heard.

Footsteps approached the hatch, and Lormo scampered back to his hiding-place. Hardly was he there concealed when the hatch was opened, and the Winho's crew commenced to lower the goods into the hold.

"Good-by, captain!" shouted the Winho's commander. "Success to you!"

"Good-by!" answered the other skipper.

"My best wishes for the little Winho!"

All the goods were finally in the hold. Then several of the Winho's crew sprung down through the hatchway, and carefully covered the articles to be smuggled with coils of rigging, spare blocks and planks.

"Humph! Very well done!" thought Lormo, who now and then took a peep over the edge of the barrel.

The men finally went on deck, and the boy could hear the sloop forging swiftly on her way.

He remained in the hold half an hour longer, when he stole cautiously toward the forecastle, which he entered through the bulkhead. As he had supposed was the case, all the men were on deck. He ascended the ladder, and, looking through the hatchway, he discovered that the

The Phantom Light-house.

sailors were amidships. He crept up, and got over the forward rail, into the knighthead. The vessel was heading straight for land, which, not a quarter of a league distant, faintly showed through the darkness. Lormo pulled a cigar from his pocket, lighted it and placed it in his mouth.

"They'll see it if they look sharp," he muttered, keeping the lighted end toward the shore.

Scarcely had the words escaped him when a heavy club-hammer descended toward his head. Had it struck him, the boy would never have made any more secret signals, as the iron must have crushed his skull. It chanced, however, that a roll of the craft, at that moment, caused him to move to one side, so that the implement dropped from the hand of the man who held it. This man was a stout seaman who had been sent forward to keep a lookout, and had espied the stranger, fully revealed by the phosphorescent light from the water.

"Dog of a spy!" he now cried, leaning over and aiming a furious blow with his knife at the young detective. "You'll never leave the Winho alive!"

Lormo nimbly avoided the blow, and struck the sailor on the temple with the butt of his pistol. It was a heavy stroke, and the man, who had bent down very low over the rail, fell headlong, striking against Lormo as he went, knocking him from his position.

The boy dropped clear of the sloop's bow, but the unconscious man struck the water, directly beneath the bobstay and the craft passed over him.

He was never again seen alive.

"Now for shore!" thought Lormo, as the vessel rushed past him.

The land was not more than two hundred feet distant, and the boy, who was a good swimmer, finally reached it. As soon as he had rested he hurried toward the city, which was about a quarter of a mile distant.

On the outskirts, looking seaward, he came upon half a dozen stout men.

"Halloo! it is Lormo!" cried one, when he was near enough for them to recognize him.

"Did you see my signal?" inquired the boy.

"No," was the answer.

"You saw the craft? That was the smuggler, with a cargo of goods."

And he went on to explain.

"We'll have them yet, if we keep the craft in sight. Come on!"

Followed by the men, Lormo hurried along shore in the direction which he supposed the vessel had taken.

But all that night he and his companions vainly searched for her.

"We are too late," said Lormo. "The goods have been landed and carted off—where to I cannot even guess."

"They are cunning rascals—those smugglers!" said one of the party. "You will earn no reward to-night, my boy!"

"No, but I will earn one some other time," replied the youth. "I will not rest until I have found the smugglers' secret rendezvous!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE WELL.

ROBERT BROWN, reclining on the bed in the locked apartment, tried to think of some plan for making his escape. While he was thus reflecting, an irresistible drowsiness stole over him, and he dropped to sleep.

He was aroused by Berta.

"Come," she said, "you will have to go with us now."

The youth soon recollected his situation.

"So I have slept!" he said.

"Yes," answered the girl, smiling. "You must be a brave boy to sleep, with men around you thirsting for your life."

"I could not help it," he replied, as he sprung from the berth. "Where are your people going to take me to?"

"That I must not say. You will have to be blindfolded."

As she spoke, Pedro appeared with several of his men. One of these tied a bandage over the boy's eyes.

Then they fastened his hands behind his back.

"Now, mark my words!" said Berta, as she drew a small pistol from her pocket. "The first of you that offers to hurt this boy will get a bullet through him!"

"We have promised," said Pedro, sullenly. "For your sake we will not hurt the fellow."

Robert was made to go on deck, and was helped into a boat alongside. He finally felt the boat strike the beach, and he was then led on. After proceeding a short distance he heard a grating noise; then he became aware that he

was descending a flight of steps. He was conducted on, and when at length the bandage was taken from his eyes, he found himself in a large apartment, with cemented walls and a stone floor.

The room contained, at present, about a dozen villainous-looking fellows, in some respects differently attired, but all wearing broadrimmed hats and loose sailor trowsers.

A sort of fierce "grin" met the boy's gaze, when he was permitted to use his eyes.

One group of men were gathered round a table provided with glasses, and were drinking beer obtained from a keg which was placed there.

Some of the younger fellows laughed, as Robert stared confusedly about him.

"Don't be frightened," said Pedro. "We won't hurt you."

Berta was not in sight.

"I was not thinking of that," said the youth, "but I cannot imagine why you want to keep me here."

"To prevent you tell tales, of course," said Pedro.

"You do not mean to keep me long, I hope."

"That will depend on yourself," answered Pedro, significantly.

"What do you mean by that?"

"You know before long."

Berta now appeared from an adjoining apartment—one of several partitioned off from the room in which the smugglers were collected.

Pedro then addressed the band.

"Men," he said, "all but four of you can now go to your homes. The late affair will cause some excitement, and there will be a search for us. Meanwhile we must keep quiet and venture on no more expeditions for the present."

As the majority of the party were Mexicans, these words were spoken in Spanish, of which language Robert had knowledge enough to understand most of what was said.

A few minutes later the dismissed outlaws departed, after which Pedro locked the one door leading into the apartment, and put the key in his pocket.

Berta now brought refreshments, and requested Robert to sit down at the table and have breakfast. The youth complied, and while he was eating, Pedro and his men withdrew to the further side of the room, where they held a conference in a low voice.

"I hope you feel well this morning?" said Berta to the boy.

"Well enough in body, but not in mind. My employer, Don Carlos, sent me to Tampico on important business, and my absence will be unaccountable to him, and give him a great deal of trouble."

"Why should you want to go back to him?" inquired Berta, giving him an arch glance. "Why not stay with us?"

"What? with smugglers and thieves? I do not like such men for company."

"We would make you rich in a few years. Sometimes our profits are very large. I do not believe that even Don Carlos realizes such large profits."

"He certainly will not if your friends keep on stealing his goods."

Berta laughed.

"I know it is wrong," she said, "but there is a good deal of excitement in the business, and I really think that a boy of spirit like you would enjoy it."

"Thank you for your good opinion of me," said Robert. "I can tell you that no inducement whatever could tempt me to lead a life of dishonor."

"Pooh! what is smuggling, after all? That is our principal business. Your employer, Don Carlos, if he could have his goods smuggled without detection in port, would do so quickly enough."

"You wrong him. Don Carlos is an honorable man. No person whatever can accuse him of unfair dealings."

"Oh, yes; that's what they all say; but I don't believe it. By joining us you will escape death, and in no other way."

"I will not join you on that account. I can die like a man, if I must."

Berta's black eyes flashed admiringly upon the speaker. They were handsome eyes; but Robert had noticed from the first that they lacked the depth and softness of Isabel's.

"You may change your opinions in a few days," she said, tossing her head with a conscious air of power.

But if she hoped to fascinate the boy into joining the smugglers, she was disappointed.

Robert hardly seemed conscious of her charms.

His whole mind was concentrated on the thought of making his escape from this den.

But it was so well guarded, night and day, that he could imagine no plan for eluding the keen watch kept up by the smugglers. Either Pedro or some other person was always near the door when he moved toward it. Meanwhile he would often place his hand, at night, on his vest, to make sure that the package he had received at the warehouse from Rupo was still safe. Its being under the padding of the garment was what had prevented its discovery by his captors. One morning Berta persuaded Bronson—Pedro being absent—to permit the boy to go out and walk with her.

Robert's heart bounded at the proposal; for he hoped he would at last find a chance to escape. The girl unlocked the door, and leading the way, the two passed out, to the surprise of the boy, into a large, beautiful garden.

Robert now threw a quick glance around him, and divining his thoughts, the young girl smiled.

As their glances met she slowly shook her head.

"You see there is no chance of your getting away from here," she said. "Besides the men you see in the garden, the walls also keep you from escaping."

In fact, on four sides of the garden the boy beheld a smooth, lofty wall, which could not be scaled without a ladder.

"Still," he argued, mentally, "there must be a door in this wall—a concealed door, by means of which the smugglers enter the garden from without."

Feeling sure he was right, he scrutinized the wall as he passed along beneath it on each side with Berta, but he could not trace the smallest crevice to show the presence of a secret door. That through which he had come was the only one to be seen, and this being large and massive, was plainly visible.

Berta plucked a rose, which she gave to her companion.

"Is it not a beautiful flower?" she said.

"Yes."

"Did you ever see anything so lovely before?" she continued, with a coquettish toss of her head.

Robert did not know she was trying to win a compliment from him—that she wanted him to say: "Yes, you are lovelier even than this rose," and so he answered:

"I like pinks better."

"Have you made up your mind about joining us, yet?"

"I am of the same mind I was in the first place."

"Stay with me," she said, softly. "Do not let them take your life. Is there then no attraction for you in this place?"

"None," answered Robert, bluntly.

"What? not—not even in me?"

Robert looked at her in surprise.

"Yes, in me!" she added, bitterly; "most men think I am attractive."

"Oh, yes, you are a handsome girl," said the boy, frankly.

A look of joy flashed across her face. She grasped his hands, with both her own.

"Promise to make me your wife," she continued, hurriedly, glancing about her to assure herself that no one except Robert heard her, "and—and—we will go together, far from this place."

Her black eyes were looking into his; she stood close to him, and he could feel her fragrant breath upon his cheek.

"I do not want to marry you," he said. "I have never thought of marrying."

"So you tell me you reject me?" she cried bitterly.

"No," he replied, not wishing to wound her feelings. "I said I do not want to marry."

"You will think better of it when I tell you that your death is planned for to-morrow."

"My death?"

"Yes. I would save you if I could, but they will contrive to kill you, in spite of me."

"You spoke of going away from here with me. Why not take me away now?"

"I can only do so by your marrying me, and saying you mean to join our band, which would throw Pedro off his guard, so that we could go away together."

"You can leave this place, at any moment?"

"Alone, yes, but not with you."

As she spoke the youth noticed that she glanced toward a well, a few yards off.

A bucket, suspended by a winch, hung over the opening.

"Can it be," thought Robert "that there is some underground passage from this place, and that it may be reached by going down into that well?"

Presently, bidding him wait where he was for her, Berta re-entered the apartment the two had left, saying she wished to speak to Bronson.

Searcely was she gone, when Robert resolved to explore the well. He sprung to it while the backs of the men in the garden were toward him and got into the bucket. Down went the latter, with great velocity, and the boy struck the bottom of the well with a loud splash.

He clung to the rope, and climbing it, tried to scan the walls of the cavity. But so intense was the gloom, that, several minutes passed ere he was able to see the sides of the well. Meanwhile, above him, he could hear the voice of Berta, as she called him, thinking he had concealed himself in the shrubbery and soon the tones of Pedro were blended with hers.

As the boy became more used to the darkness, he could see a cavity in the left side of the well.

He swung himself into it without hesitation, and crept along a passage before him.

CHAPTER VII.

THE COMBAT AND RESCUE.

SOME days after Robert's departure Don Carlos, not having received the expected package, repaired to Tampico, to learn from his agent, Rupo, of the boy's strange disappearance.

The watchmen were questioned, but they could not explain the mystery. They had discovered that the upper store-room had been robbed of some goods, but whether the young clerk was in that room or in some of the others at the time, they could not tell. They were sure they did not hear him give any cry of alarm.

"Well," said the merchant, "here is the third person I have sent to look into the robbery of my goods vanished like the two others, although in a more unaccountable manner. You did not see Robert come down or go out after he went up-stairs?" he added, turning to the watchmen.

Antolo said he had not, but as he spoke he looked so confused that the suspicions of Don Carlos were aroused.

He seized him by the collar and threatened to have him arrested if he did not tell him more about the affair, for he was sure that he kept something back.

Antolo, becoming alarmed, then confessed that he was drunk on the night in question, and that Robert might therefore have passed him without attracting his attention.

The merchant was angry and he gave orders to Rupo to discharge the fellow and hire a better man. Then he returned to his lodgings.

"Well, father, what success?" inquired Isabel, who had accompanied her parent to Tampico.

Don Carlos told her all he could learn. His daughter turned pale, and there was on her face a troubled look, which she vainly strove to conceal.

"Did I not say you should not have sent him on such an errand?" she said. "I am afraid he is lost."

"I hope not, both for his sake and for mine, as he had in his possession a package he was to send to me, and which should have reached me yesterday had he delivered it to the express company. He was unable to do so, I learn, as their place had taken fire. Now I have to infer either that he has been murdered or that he has absconded with my package, which contained about twenty thousand dollars in bills and checks."

"No, he would not have gone off with your money," said Isabel, quickly. "You know you have trusted him with larger sums of money than that, and have always found him faithful and honest."

"That does not prove he did not conclude to keep the money on this occasion. Still, I will not accuse him of it, as I am not sure."

"No, you are not apt to come to conclusions in a hurry, father, and I do not believe you would have had a suspicion like that you have just expressed had not some person suggested to you that Robert had probably taken your money."

"I will own that it was Cardinas who put that thought into my head. He appears not merely to think that the boy has absconded with the amount, but to feel sure of it."

"Of course he would think so. I believe he dislikes that boy."

When several days had passed, and the mer-

chant still could glean no tidings of Robert, he believed he would never see him again.

Isabel resolved to make inquiries, as well as her father. While doing so, one day, she met the little custom-house detective, Lormo, whom she had occasionally seen conversing with her father, on his visits to Tampico.

"I wish you could find Robert for us. I believe he was a friend of yours," she said, as they talked about the missing youth.

"Robbers are not in my line, you know, señorita."

"Robbers?"

"Yes, I think it is robbers who have made away with my poor friend."

"Why do you think so?"

"Because the store was robbed on the very night he was on watch. Of course it was to the interest of the thieves to kill him and conceal his body when he detected them robbing the store."

"But my father thinks he may have left the store before that."

"I don't believe he did. I will look for him as much as my duties will allow, but I am afraid he has been killed."

Lormo, on leaving Isabel, went in a direction opposite to that taken by the girl. She wandered toward the outskirts of the town, in a thoughtful mood. The truth was that she took much interest in Robert, and, since his disappearance thought of little else, day or night.

As she now marched on, she found herself approaching the ruins of an old stone fort. To the right of this fort, which stood on a slight elevation, there was a high wall of stone, one side of which was built against the hill. The ground inclosed by this wall had once belonged to a wealthy Mexican, who having been detected in treason and peculation, was obliged to leave the country—to flee for his life. A mob had burned his handsome residence to the ground, but they had not thought it worth while to molest the garden wall.

In a clump of shrubbery on the outside of this wall, three or four crouching figures now were watching the girl. One of these was the smuggler, Pedro, a few yards from whom, behind a tree, stood Captain Cardinas.

All at once, as Isabel approached, Pedro, followed by his companions sprung out at the girl, leveling pistols at her head.

"Don't attempt to run or cry out!" cried the smuggler. "If you do, we will kill you."

Isabel was too much terrified at first, either to move or to speak.

"What can you want of me?" she finally gasped.

"You have a gold watch," said Pedro. "We will take that, and also the pearl necklace about your neck!"

Isabel surrendered these things.

"Now you will let me go," she said, turning to leave.

"No, señorita, you cannot leave us, yet. You are rich, and we intend to get a ransom for you."

As he spoke he made a sign to his companions, who were advancing to seize her, when Cardinas came rushing from behind the tree, brandishing his sword.

"Away, ruffians!" he shouted. "The first who lays a hand on that girl, dies!"

Isabel recognized him and ran toward him. The smugglers followed her, but Cardinas threw himself between them and the young lady.

"Come on!" he cried, fiercely, as they now paused. "You shall walk over my dead body before you offer harm to this sweet girl!"

As he spoke he pulled a revolver from his breast-pocket, and there was a rapid exchange of shots.

All the smugglers except Pedro went limping off, apparently wounded. The outlaw sprung at Cardinas, sword in hand. The weapons crossed each other and a fierce struggle ensued, until, by a dexterous stroke, the captain broke the weapon of his adversary, who then took to his heels, to soon vanish after his companions in the shrubbery.

Isabel, with clasped hands and anxious gaze, had been watching the unequal fray.

Seeing Cardinas now in pursuit of his last antagonist, she called to him:

"No, no, let him go! You imperil your life by following him. He may lead you into an ambush."

"But he has robbed you of your necklace and watch. I saw it all as I approached. He shall surrender these things or die!"

And heedless of her entreaties, he kept on his way to soon disappear in the shrubbery. There, when out of Isabel's sight, he met Pedro.

"Here they are," said the latter, suppressing a laugh, as he surrendered the necklace and the watch.

Cardinas smiled.

"It was well planned, was it not?" said he. "To her dying day the lady will believe that I rescued her by the most desperate courage."

"Yes, the señorita cannot doubt that the combat was real. She has no suspicion that the rescue was a mock one."

"And, now," said Cardinas, "you will show me the crevice in the wall, through which Isabel and I can look into your garden. You are sure that Robert Brown is there, at this moment?"

"He is there with my sister, and when you look, some of my men, the same who attacked you, shall be there, too."

"That is good!" answered the captain, exultingly. "Go, Pedro, and work quickly. After we have seen the boy, you must—"

He made a significant sigh.

"He shall not live an hour afterward," said the smuggler.

"But you have told me that your sister would not allow you to kill him."

"There is more than one way to kill a dog. One grain of a certain powder in his coffee will carry him off with the cramps, and my sister be none the wiser, as to his having been poisoned."

"It is well. If you make way with that little wretch, all the profits from those stolen goods are yours. I will not claim anything."

"We understand each other," said Pedro. "You will receive word, before to-night, that there is no longer danger of Robert Brown's telling tales against you."

The two then separated, and Cardinas returned to Isabel.

"I overtook the rascal, and forced him to surrender the things he robbed you of," said the youth, as he gave her back her jewelry.

"You have done me a great service, both by rescuing me and obtaining for me the watch, which is especially prized by me, as it was a present from my mother, before she died," answered Isabel.

"What would I not do for you?" replied Cardinas, warmly. "I would risk my life a thousand times for your sake! Believe me, Isabel, you are dearer to me—"

"Shall we not now return to the city?" she interrupted. "You can go with me to father, and I will describe your noble conduct to him."

"Wait a few moments," said her companion. "I can do you yet another service. I can show to you, in his true colors, one in whom you appear to take a friendly interest—one whom you were probably searching for when you were assaulted by the robbers."

The young girl looked at him in surprise.

"Surely you do not mean Robert Brown?"

"It is to that little rascal I allude."

"Rascal?"

"Don't be indignant; I would not call him a rascal unless I could prove to you that he is one. Your father has told me that the fellow was intrusted with a package of money for him, and I will own that, for a person like this boy, it may have proved a great temptation. Come with me, and I will show you what I have discovered, while searching for the man who took your jewelry."

Isabel followed him to a certain part of the garden wall, where there was a large crevice, between the stones of which it was composed.

"Look for yourself," said Cardinas, pointing to the little opening.

Isabel, gazing through the latter, beheld to her surprise her father's clerk, Robert Brown, strolling through the garden by the side of the handsome smuggler girl, Berta!

In another part of the inclosure was Pedro, with the same men who had assaulted her. Robert seemed to be on amicable terms with the girl, as the two were conversing together in a low voice.

"You see," whispered Cardinas, "that this is a rendezvous of the thieves, and that they are probably the same persons who robbed your father's warehouse. The boy has evidently joined them of his own accord."

"We are not sure of that," she answered.

"Not sure? See there!"

As he spoke, it was the moment when Berta gave the youth a rose and laid a hand on his shoulder.

Isabel drew back, her black eyes flashing, a deathly paleness upon her face.

"Come," said Cardinas, taking her arm. "I know now you have seen enough to satisfy you. It remains for your father and me to entrap the whole gang."

Isabel answered not a word, but all the way to the city, Cardinas could feel her tremble upon his arm.

CHAPTER VIII. THE PURSUIT.

CREEPING along the passage he had discovered in the side of the well, Robert finally reached what appeared to be its extremity. There was before him a rock, a sort of boulder, having crevices at the edges, showing that it was placed over some opening.

He tried to move the rock by pushing it, but he was unsuccessful. Looking round him, he espied a heavy piece of wood, shaped like a club, lying on the ground. Putting this under the boulder, and using it in lieu of a crowbar, he contrived thus to move it from the aperture.

Emerging from the passage, he now found himself among a mass of shrubbery, consisting of briars and vines, so thick that he could scarcely force his way through them. When, at last, he disengaged himself from the entangling mass, he perceived that he was at the bottom of a gully—the same, he now believed, in which he had seen the crouching figure, on the day he passed with the package of money he had received from Rupo.

"Free, at last!" he cried, joyfully. "Now all I have to do is to make my way to the city, and take passage aboard some fishing craft bound to the part of the coast near which Don Carlos lives."

But he was mistaken. He little dreamed of the perils and dangers which still menaced him.

Although no one had seen him enter the well—Berta, as stated, having gone into the rendezvous just before he descended by means of the bucket—the voice of the girl, the moment she came back to the garden, brought Pedro and some of his companions there. They instantly commenced to make a diligent search for the youth, and finally looked into the well. . .

"The bucket was not down at the bottom when we were here before," said one.

"Are you sure of that?" inquired Pedro.

"Yes; for I felt thirsty, and was going to draw up some cool water to drink, when you came and told us to go back into the cave. I noticed the bucket hanging in its place."

"Why did you not speak before? The boy has evidently discovered the secret passage leading to the gully, and has made his escape."

"I did not notice that the bucket was missing until just now."

"Well, in future keep your eyes about you."

Then he gave orders to his men.

"Four of you hurry to the gully. You will get there, if you go quickly, before he has time to come out of it. Meanwhile I will go through the well-passage, with another of our men, to look for him there. Shoot him down the instant you see him!" he added, lowering his voice so that Berta could not hear him.

He might as well have spoken out, for her keen black eyes were upon him, and she guessed what he had said.

"Let no one harm the boy!" she cried. "The first one who does so dies by my hand!"

The men knew she meant what she said.

"Don't hurt him, then," said Pedro, "but when you capture him, take him to the new rendezvous, as this one is now of no use to us. The dogs of the law will soon know of this place."

The men then departed, but Berta followed them closely, determined that the boy should not be harmed.

As the smugglers drew near the gully, they saw Robert Brown's head thrust through the shrubbery, on the edge of the cavity.

The youth, after leaving the passage, had climbed the side of the hollow, thinking he would find his way clear to the city. To his dismay he now beheld the gang who were approaching, with Berta coming up in the rear.

Robert threw a hasty glance about him, but, as usual, the vicinity of this place was deserted except by his foes. He saw not a living soul to call upon for assistance, and his captors had deprived him of every instrument with which he might defend himself, even to his pocket-knife. True, he had the club with which he had moved back the boulder, but of course this would be comparatively useless before men armed with daggers and pistols.

He therefore drew back into the gully and crept among the thick shrubbery, hoping that, when his pursuers came to search for him, he might find a chance to slip away from them unobserved.

Lying motionless, he finally heard the party enter the gully, and commence to beat down the brush.

The noise they made enabled him to elude them by dodging from place to place, and at length, he reached the further end of the cavity.

Up this he crawled, and contrived to draw himself out of the hollow without being observed.

He now moved off in the direction of the city, but he had not proceeded far, when, on looking behind him, he saw the party in pursuit. He changed his course toward the seashore, keeping among some sand-hills, which concealed him from the gaze of the smugglers. The shades of night were falling, and the boy thought he might possibly escape the outlaws by hiding himself in some hollow. He was about creeping into one, when his gaze fell upon a small skiff tied to a stake, alongside the beach. He sprung into the light craft, loosened it, and finding a paddle in the boat, worked it away from the land.

"We see you! better come back!" shouted Pedro, as he and his party reached the shore.

"If you don't, we will fire!"

The youth did not heed the threat, but kept on, and finally headed the skiff, toward Tampico. Several shots were fired at him, but they did not take effect, and soon he heard the angry voice of Berta ordering them to desist.

It was now so dark that the youth could see little more than the outlines of the gang, as they moved along the beach.

Ahead of him he could dimly descry the hull and spars of a schooner.

"It is likely she will prove to be a friendly craft," he thought.

He had discovered that the skiff leaked badly, and that he could not keep her afloat much longer. To go ashore would be sure to bring in the power of the smugglers, and he therefore determined to make for the craft ahead.

"Boat ahoy!" came a hoarse voice from the deck, as he approached.

"Ahoy! there!" answered Robert. "What schooner is that, and who commands her?"

"The Maria, Captain Cardinas!" was the response.

"The last vessel, then, that I should board," muttered the boy. "I am not going to put myself in any such trap as that."

He changed his course, heading past the vessel, but, as he did so, he heard a boat lowered, and could distinguish the voice of Cardinas, as the latter ordered his crew to give way. In fact, the captain, who had been on deck when the hail was given, had thought he recognized Robert's voice, which, being peculiar, was one that could not well be mistaken.

Perceiving that he was thus pursued by water, and, knowing he would soon be overtaken, he made directly for a cluster of rocks, which he saw looming ahead.

Cardinas gained on him, but, while he was still some yards from the fugitive, the latter glided among the rocks, and, leaping out of the skiff, concealed himself in a hollow, among the rugged masses.

The captain seeing the skiff gliding on, beyond the rocks, thought that its occupant was lying down in it, and so kept on after the craft. Before he reached it, however, the vessel having filled, had gone down in a little whirlpool, a few fathoms from the rocks.

Cardinas then returned to his schooner, which he had scarcely done, when he saw a light ashore, evidently being waved as a signal.

He again lowered his boat, and made for the beach, on which he found Pedro and some of his men.

"What are you doing here?" inquired the St. Mary's captain, as he and Pedro walked to one side.

"Looking for that little rascal, Robert Brown, who has escaped us!"

"Then it's all right!" cried the young captain, rubbing his hands. "So it was he, as I thought?"

"I don't understand you."

"My first officer hailed some one approaching in a skiff, and I thought I recognized the voice of Brown. I gave pursuit as he passed us, and he and his skiff went down in the whirlpool, near the Off Shore Rocks."

"You are sure he went down?"

"I am sure he was lying in the skiff, for I could just make out his hat in the darkness. He must have sunk, and glad enough I am to be rid of him."

Pedro seemed much relieved.

"How about the search for us?" he inquired. "Did you tell the authorities about our rendezvous?"

"Yes, and guided them to it. I did not wait long to witness their discomfiture when they found the place deserted, but came straight back to the beach and boarded my schooner."

"How long ago was this?"

"About half an hour. They have probably reached the place by this time, and found it empty."

"And are now searching for us, I suppose?"

"It is likely."

"Well, we will go to our new rendezvous, which I would defy all the revenue officers in the universe to find."

"Take care! those fellows have sharp eyes."

"They would never think of looking under the sea. Hah! hah! to think that part of this ocean dungeon is directly under the warehouse! The Jesuits knew what they were about when they built that convent."

"You cannot enter the warehouse from the water dungeon!"

"No, not now, owing to the alterations made by Don Carlos. The planks of the lower floor cover the secret door, which used to open into it. The entrance to the dungeon is through a passage in an old, disused graveyard vault, far back of the building. No one would suspect there was a secret door there, as the wall of the vault looks like one even surface of stone."

"How, then, did you find it? You have not yet told me that."

"An old sexton, who had once been a friend of my father, told me the secret, just before his death, which happened a week ago."

The twain now parted. Cardinas returning to the schooner and Pedro, with his companions, hurrying off in the direction of their new retreat.

Meanwhile Robert Brown was overjoyed with the success of his strategy. He watched for some passing craft, which should come near enough for him to hail it, but he watched in vain.

Toward morning he resolved to endeavor to reach the shore on a plank which was among the driftwood that had collected between the openings in the rocks.

Straddling the plank, he paddled with his hands, and finally gained the beach.

The light of dawn was just beginning to break, and as the youth looked about him, he fancied he saw a female figure approaching.

He crouched behind a bank, and the young woman passed so near him that he was enabled to recognize Berta.

The girl was walking rapidly, with bowed head, and with hands clasped before her, and as she passed Robert heard her say:

"I am afraid the boy is lost! The skiff was a leaky one and must have filled before he got far from the shore."

It was evident that the girl had remained all night on the beach in the hope of seeing something of the fugitive.

Scarcely was she out of sight in the gloom, when Robert started toward Tampico. As he moved on he did not notice a form which was swiftly and stealthily following him.

This was Cardinas, who, having been on deck while the young clerk was paddling shoreward on the plank, had dimly descried his figure.

A suspicion of the truth had at once flashed across his mind, and he had sprung into his gig and sculled it toward the beach, first having told his second officer, who had the watch, that he was going ashore to meet a friend with whom he had an appointment. As it was not uncommon for him to thus go off alone in the gig, the officer thought nothing of it.

As soon as he reached the shore he secured his gig by means of the warp to a rock and started, as shown, after Robert.

As he had kept among the sand-hills, he had not seen Berta, who had passed on the other side of them.

CHAPTER IX.

WOUNDED.

"AY! as I thought, it is Robert Brown," the captain muttered, as the increasing light enabled him to recognize the figure of the youth. "I would not have believed I could have made such a blunder as I did. I could have sworn he went down in the skiff."

Stealthily approaching the boy, he pulled his pistol from his pocket as he drew near him.

Robert had now reached a part of the shore which formed a small peninsula projecting into the sea. Not twenty fathoms from this tongue of land lay an old sloop, partly keeled over on its side, with its topmast broken off near the truck, and its mainsail carelessly furled on the boom.

Cardinas, more than once, glanced uneasily toward this craft.

"I don't believe there is any one aboard," he thought. "The sloop has been laid up there for several weeks by the pearl-divers who used it, because it needed repairing. Still, there might possibly be some one aboard, and I will wait until the boy passes behind that sand-hill just ahead before I attack him, as I could not there be seen from the craft."

A moment later Robert passed behind the sand-hill, when taking aim at his head, the captain pulled trigger.

The weapon did not go off, and hearing the click of the falling hammer, the boy turned, to behold Cardinas, now within two feet of him.

Before he could speak or raise a hand the captain struck him a heavy blow between the eyes with the stock of the weapon, causing him to stagger back, half-stunned. Robert, confused though he was, quickly recovered himself, and as Cardinas made a lunge at him with his sword, he knocked it aside with his club, which he still had in his possession.

"You young dog of an American," cried the captain. "Your time has come, I told you I was not done with you."

And he made another thrust at the boy.

"I am not done with you, thief and rascal as you are!" answered Robert, as he again parried the keen weapon.

Then he dealt Cardinas a sounding whack with the club on the back, as the captain half-turned to avoid the blow, which was aimed at his head.

"Curse you—you rat," said Cardinas, as he made a third lunge at the boy.

The latter endeavored to parry it, but was only partly successful. He felt a cold, sharp pain, as about an inch of the weapon penetrated his side. The next moment his enemy would have run him through the body, had not the young clerk struck him on the wrist of his sword-arm a blow which benumbed his hand, so that his weapon dropped from his grasp. He picked it up with his left, but, ere he could use it, the sound of quick footsteps approaching was heard, and Cardinas hurried off, soon disappearing among the sand-hills abeam.

Meanwhile Robert felt the blood gushing from his wound, and as it made him weak he sat down.

The footsteps which had been heard drew nearer, and, a minute later, Berta appeared from behind one of the sand-hills.

"You are hurt!" she cried, anxiously. "Tell me where."

The boy had already loosened the clothing about his side.

"It was Cardinas—was it not?" continued Berta, her eyes flashing.

"Yes, it was he who gave me the wound, but, after all, it is only a mere scratch!"

"It is bad enough to weaken you for some time," she said. "Coward! coward! that he was to attack an unarmed boy! I will pay him for this!"

As she spoke, she tore a strip of cloth from a mantle she wore, and proceeded to tightly bandage the wound.

Then she pulled from her pocket a small flask containing liquor, and made the boy drink it.

"Do you feel better now?"

"Yes, I think I can keep on my way to Tampico."

He rose, and was surprised to perceive that he was almost too weak to walk.

"You will help me on my way to the city?" he said.

"No, you are not fit to go. Exertion of that kind would be the death of you, in the end. You need rest. Your wound is worse than you think."

"What, then, am I to do? Will you go to the city and get a conveyance for me?"

"What! leave you here for that cowardly rascal to come back and murder? No! I will stay with you. I will cure you. You need to lie now in a reclining position, but not here on the beach, in the sun, which will soon be very hot."

As she spoke, she bathed his head with some of the liquor, tenderly pushing back his hair as she did so.

He started back as if to move away from her.

"What! are my touch and presence then so disagreeable to you?" she inquired sadly.

"Oh, no," he answered, not wishing to hurt her feelings. He was really grateful for her attentions, and believed that, although she was a member of a gang of smugglers, she was a friend to him, for it was of course plainly evident that, had she not interfered in his behalf,

he would have been killed by the outlaw band soon after his capture.

"Come," she said, "you shall lean on me, and I will take you to the craft yonder, in the shallow water, just beyond the peninsula."

As she spoke, she pointed toward the pearl-fisher.

"Will the people there be friendly to me?"

"There is not a soul aboard. The craft has been abandoned for the present, until it can be repaired, if it ever is, which I think is doubtful, as the pearl-fishers who sailed it are now using another vessel."

She assisted the youth to his feet, and, putting an arm around him as he leaned on her, she helped him to the end of the peninsula, and thence into the shallow water beyond.

Within a few fathoms of the craft, the water was too deep to be waded.

"Wait here," said Berta, and, plunging forward, she swam like a mermaid. Gaining the lower side of the sloop, she climbed to the deck.

A moment later she launched overboard a stout plank. Pushing this before her, she returned to Robert's side. Then she helped him on the plank, and getting on herself, worked it alongside of the vessel. She next sprung aboard and lowered some gangway-steps, by means of which she finally got him to the deck.

"I am a great deal of trouble to you," he said.

"I would do much for you," she answered, her black eyes flashing with love and tenderness. "It is no trouble, it is a pleasure. Besides, I feel that I owe more than this to you for the way our band has made you suffer."

She helped him down into the hold, for cabin the craft did not have. Here there were some chairs, a couple of bunks with mattresses in them, a table, a few coils of rope and some old canvas. In the center of the apartment a large object, shaped like a bell, with strong glass lenses fitted in near the top, riveted his attention.

"What is that?" he inquired.

"It is a diving-bell."

"I did not know that pearl-fishers used those things."

"They are not in the habit of it. The captain of this craft was persuaded to try one by a person having one to sell. The sailors used it once and never again, for they did not like it, preferring to go down in the usual manner."

Robert was helped into one of the bunks, where he lay on his back as Berta advised him to do. This gave him great relief from pain, and he was soon able to walk a little.

"Now, then, I think I can make a start for Tampico," he said.

The girl shook her head.

"Not yet," she answered.

"What makes the craft rock so? I thought she was in shallow water, her keel touching bottom."

"So she was, but the tide has risen higher than usual and she is afloat, though held by an anchor."

As Berta spoke she ascended the ladder leading on deck to take a look at the water and the sky.

When she descended, Robert noticed that her face wore an anxious expression.

"We are going to have a gale," she said. "It will be upon us in a few moments. Don't attempt to come up, but stay here while I go on deck again."

As she spoke, there was a deafening roar, followed by a wild rush of waters, which latter threw the craft down almost on her beam-ends.

CHAPTER X.

WRECKED.

BERTA now hurried on deck. The moment she reached it, the first object that met her gaze was Captain Cardinas, now on the after part of his vessel, spy-glass in hand, watching the damaged sloop, which it was evident he had seen the girl board with Robert.

"Rascal!" she muttered, between her teeth, her eyes flashing, "I will be even with you for hurting that boy! Don Carlos shall know from me your true character. He shall know that you are the thief, who, from the first, planned the robbery of his goods with my brother—that you allow him to pass you and smuggle his cargoes into the city, sharing the profits with him."

The wind was now blowing with terrific violence, and great sheets of spray were driven over the vessel, fore and aft. She was nearly on her beam-ends, thumping against the sand-bank, on which she lay with a violence which threatened to soon break her to pieces.

Berta running to the round-house aft, found

an old ax, with the help of which she intended to slip the cable.

It would be impossible now to take Robert ashore through the raging waters, and unless the sloop could be got adrift, it must break up.

"I will save Robert or die!" cried the brave girl, her eyes flashing. "Our only hope is in getting the vessel adrift. She will be carried off Tampico, and I trust that some craft will come from the city to our relief if I make a signal!"

She soon had the anchor clear off shore, and the gale bore the sloop seaward. With some difficulty, she partly loosened the mainsail; and then, lashing the helm amidships, she thus kept the craft directly before the wind. Bending on to the after balyards a strip of blue tarpaulin, she hoisted it half-mast as a signal, but scarcely had she done so, when the rack of the storm was driven between the vessel and the city.

"God help the boy!" cried Berta. "They cannot see the signal from Tampico!"

On went the damaged craft further out to sea every moment.

Through the driving sheets of spray, Berta, springing on the bow, peered ahead.

"All is lost!" she exclaimed, as a mist in that direction lifted. "There are the 'Black Rocks,' not fifty fathoms abeam. They extend in a line so that I cannot escape them, unless I can beat to windward of them, which I believe to be impossible in such a blow!"

She loosened the rest of the mainsail, sheeted it as well as she could, and took her post at the wheel.

A momentary lull in the gale inspired her with hope. She jammed the wheel hard-a-port, and shooting close up to the wind, the sloop pointed her bow a little to windward of the line of dangerous rocks.

Berta's whole face lighted with joy. She had begun to think she would pass the rocks, when, all at once, the gale roared with redoubled violence, and the sloop's head swung off, pointing straight for the rugged masses.

"She is gone! No hope now!" muttered the girl.

She lashed the wheel, and compressing her lips, with a look of determination, she descended into the hold.

"Well," said Robert, "how did you find things?"

"Bad enough. In ten minutes from now we will strike the rocks and go to pieces, when in no way can you save yourself, in your present disabled condition."

"I don't suppose I could swim much."

"No, and if you could, I doubt if it would do you much good. We are close upon the 'Black Rocks,' and the breakers there would interfere with the best swimmer. Come here, she added, as she walked to the diving-bell, "you must get into this."

"In the diving-bell? How do you know it will go down straight when the craft breaks up? If it does not, I would be worse off than if I did not get into it!"

"I think it will go down straight. I will try to make it go so."

"How will you do it?"

Berta seized the end of a strong rope attached to the top of the bell, and secured it to the main-boom on deck.

Then she returned to the hold.

"It is time you were in the bell," she said to Robert, taking his arm.

The instrument was raised on blocks, so that any person could creep up under it, and get into it. Berta assisted the boy to one of the shelves in the metallic chamber.

"How will I breathe under water?" inquired the youth.

A rubber hose is attached to the rope and to the top of the bell. If that does not get under water, it will, I think, give you air enough to keep you alive, until you are discovered. At any rate, the instrument is your only alternative, under the circumstances. It will, at least, give you a chance for life. You will find a lantern and provisions in the bell. God grant that you may be saved, but there is no certainty about it, and you must be prepared for the worst."

"Are you not also going to get into the bell?"

"No; I am going to stay on deck, and do my best to keep the bell straight. If I am not swept overboard too soon, I think I will succeed."

"So, then you are risking your life for me?"

"I would risk it a thousand times for you!" was the reply. "Good-by!" And as she spoke, the impulsive girl pressed her beautiful lips to those of Robert.

The next moment she was gone.

"I've half a mind to get out of the bell again," muttered the boy.

But just then a violent roll of the craft caused the instrument to slip off the blocks, and the youth found himself imprisoned in the hollow vessel.

Meanwhile Berta had returned to the deck. She took her position by the diving-bell rope, and securely fastened the upper part of the hose to the boom.

"This spar will be the first to go when we strike," she thought. "Neither the rope nor the hose will be dislodged from it, and it will serve as a sort of mark for Robert's situation."

The sloop was now within a few fathoms of the rocks. A huge breaker came rolling along, and in a second the vessel struck, with a loud crash.

She parted amidships, the mainmast at the same time going over, dragging the boom with it.

Brave Berta clung to the boom, and, even when among the rushing, whirling waters, she put her hands on the hose of the diving-bell to make sure it was firm.

As she did so, a huge breaker struck her and swept her from her hold.

She endeavored to swim to a rock near her, when another sea dashed her against a rugged mass, depriving her of her senses. For a moment her dark hair streamed out on the foaming water. Then she went down to never again rise in life.

"Do you see her, now?" inquired Cardinas, who from his sloop had, as stated, been watching the damaged craft. He spoke to his first officer, an evil-looking personage name Bango—some years older than himself.

"No; the craft has gone to pieces, and it is not likely we'll ever see that girl again!"

Cardinas still scanned the water with his glass. The fragments of the sloop were borne out to sea, and only the rocks and white water were visible where she had broken up. The young captain breathed a sigh of relief.

"The boy is gone, sure enough, now," he thought.

"He can never tell tales against me. Neither can that girl, Berta, who I believe, had she lived, would have told everything out of spite!"

"Those are bad rocks," said Bango. "As they are about half a league from shore, they are in the way of in-bound craft. There is at times a sort of whirlpool among them, and there is a legend that the spirits of people who have been drowned there, have been seen flitting among the rocks."

"Nonsense!" gasped Cardinas, turning as pale as death. "You don't mean to say that you think the ghosts of the two young fellows, Pedro drowned there ever come up again."

"Santa Maria only knows," answered the first officer, crossing himself. "I shouldn't like to see the ghosts of Henrique and Jason, as we had a band in having them drowned!"

Cardinas, who, as well as his first officer, was superstitious at heart, shuddered, as he said in a low voice:

"Be careful how you speak about that. Our men are true, so long as we can give them extra wages, but there is no knowing what they might not do for the large reward that has been offered for the explanation of the disappearance of those two persons."

"You can depend on me. The men shall never know about the affair."

"That is right. Now, then, as soon as the storm is over, I must go to the smugglers' rendezvous and tell Pedro that his sister and that boy are both lost."

Three hours later the gale went down. Cardinas was then rowed ashore, and he hurried to the secret retreat of the outlaws.

Pedro merely shrugged his shoulders when he learned his sister's fate.

"She was a good helper," he said, "but her foolish attachment to that boy would, I think, have got us into trouble had she lived."

"Fortunately, he is gone, too, so that we have now nothing more to fear."

"I suppose the custom-house fellows are hunting us up by this time."

"Yes, but they can never find you if you keep close. The person most to be feared is that young detective, Lormo. He is a shrewd boy, and for that reason he is paid better than any of the 'force' employed."

"I will balk him. If he comes near enough to me and I have a good chance—"

Here Pedro significantly tapped the handle of a dagger protruding from under his jacket.

"Taking life is risky. I would not do so if I were you, unless I was sure that the deed could be done without the body ever being found."

"Come this way," said Pedro.

Cardinas followed his conductor through the vaulted apartment until the two reached a paved archway. Then Pedro held up the lantern he carried, showing a pit, at the bottom of which could be heard the wash of water.

"A body thrown down there," he said, "with a weight tied to it, would be carried out to sea by the under-current, and would never rise to the surface."

CHAPTER XI.

THE RENDEZVOUS.

WHEN Isabel returned to her lodgings, on that day when Cardinas pretended to rescue her, and afterward showed her Robert Brown among the outlaws, she went straight to her room, leaving the captain with her father.

"It is very strange," the young girl muttered, as she bowed her head upon her hand. "I would not have believed it had not I seen him there. He really had the appearance of one who had voluntarily joined the gang. It must have been that wicked girl I saw with him who induced him to become a member of the band."

Her eyes flashed as she said this, and the color forsook her cheeks.

"She is not a beautiful girl," thought Isabel, as she glanced at a reflection of her own bright face in the mirror. "She is bold and showy in appearance—that is all."

Meanwhile Cardinas was giving an account to the surprised Don Carlos of his rescue of his daughter, and of his discovery of Robert Brown among the outlaws.

"You saw that boy with those rascals, you say?"

"I did; your daughter saw him, too."

"A prisoner, of course."

"No; he had the air of one who had joined them voluntarily. He was with a girl belonging to the party. They were evidently on amicable terms."

"This is very strange. You think those are the persons who robbed my warehouse?"

"I have no doubt of it. They robbed the place, and induced your boy-watcher to join them."

"They must be smugglers as well as thieves. There has been a good deal of smuggling going on lately, Captain Cardinas, in spite of your watchfulness."

The young captain colored.

"Upon my word," he said. "The Government would need a whole fleet of vessels on the coast to entirely prevent smuggling. With my little craft I do the best I can."

"I have no doubt of it," said Don Carlos, heartily. "And now, about this boy, Robert. Do you know what you have told me has almost destroyed my faith in any human being?"

"Pooh! I never had much faith in that fellow!"

"I had. I supposed I could rely upon his honor."

"It is easy enough to be honorable where there is no temptation to be otherwise," sneered Cardinas. "Remember the boy never before had so large a sum of your money with him."

"For that very reason I should not have supposed that the smugglers could have bribed him to join them."

"There was a girl in the case, you know, and it is often in the power of bad women to persuade our sex to do wrong—especially when the wrong-doing will fill our own pockets!" added the speaker.

As already stated, Don Carlos was naturally of a suspicious nature, and as appearances were against Robert, Cardinas soon persuaded him to believe that Robert was a dishonest thief.

The two lost no time in reporting to the quarters of the Vigilantes and also to the custom-house, where they gave information of what had happened, and where Cardinas carefully described the location of the rendezvous in which he had seen the outlaws.

It chanced that Lormo was lounging near when the captain and his companion were talking to the chief. When the former spoke of Robert Brown, having voluntarily joined the smugglers, he could detect the air of satisfaction with which this part of the statement was made by Cardinas.

"I never liked that fellow," thought Lormo. "People who are fond of accusing others of doing wrong, are often mean, contemptible scoundrels themselves. He will bear watching!"

And the shrewd boy resolved, from that moment, to keep a careful watch upon Cardinas.

With a number of others and also with a party of Vigilantes, escorted by the young captain, Lormo was sent to the rendezvous.

Ladders being brought, the walls were scaled, and a careful search was made of the vaulted cavern, but the smugglers were gone.

"I thought so," said Lormo, loud enough for Cardinas to hear him.

The young captain turned quickly to meet the clear, steady gray eyes of the speaker.

"You thought what?" inquired Cardinas.

"That you wouldn't find any of those fellows here."

"Why?"

"Because they must have known beforehand that we were coming, and so they had a good chance to get off!"

The captain looked relieved, and this did not escape Lormo's attention.

"It almost looks as if he thought I was going to accuse him of having warned them," chuckled the lad, as soon as he left the premises. "Well, I do more than half think he did, but I won't say it is so, for people are sometimes mistaken."

A few hours later, Lormo, with others detailed for that purpose, was making a vigorous search for the smugglers.

The boy had disguised himself so that his own mother would not have known him. He had changed his attire, and had so blackened his face with a burnt cork that he looked almost like a negro.

Separating from the rest of the party, he placed himself behind a sand-hill, whence he could watch the schooner of Captain Cardinas. It was now just after the storm had subsided, and Cardinas had lowered his boat to be taken ashore. As the captain moved off, Lormo kept nearly behind him, shielded from observation by a ridge of land along the base of which he crept. At length, arriving where there were trees and shrubbery, the youth walked upright, keeping himself screened by the foliage. He saw Cardinas finally enter the tomb in the graveyard, and without hesitation, he moved on after him.

Just as the captain disappeared, however, in the vault, the boy felt a hand on his arm.

"Where are you going?" came a low, stern voice in his ear, and turning, he beheld a ruffianly-looking fellow, with a deep scar between the eyes.

"I have lost my way," answered Lormo, disguising his voice.

"Where do you want to go to?"

"To Tampico. I am half-starved, and am looking for work."

"What kind of work? Are you particular?"

"Anything I will do. I don't care what it is, so long as I can earn money."

"Where are you from?"

"I don't like to tell you."

"Why?"

"I'm afraid you might have me arrested."

"Ho! ho! I believe you are some prisoner."

"Now you know it, for God's sake don't tell."

"Have no fear. What were you put in prison for?"

"For—for-stealing."

"Would you like to steal again?"

"Try me; but first give me something to eat."

"I think you'll do," said the man. "Come this way."

He opened the door of the vault with a key taken from his pocket.

Lormo followed him to the bottom of the vault, looking keenly about him as he went.

"Now you will have to let me blindfold you," said the man.

"All right," answered the boy.

Taking a kerchief, the smuggler fastened it about the eyes of the youth; then he led him forward, and a moment later the young detective heard a grating noise in front of him, like that of a door being opened.

Lormo was conducted some yards ere the bandage was taken from his eyes, when he found himself in a large, bricked apartment, with a cemented floor, and lighted by lamps in niches on the walls. There were about twenty smugglers present, some of them seated on benches, playing cards and others conversing together.

"Here is a boy who wants to join us," said Lormo's companion.

One of the band called Pedro, who was at that moment showing Cardinas the pit in the outer passage.

Followed by Cardinas, who, however, was so closely muffled in his cloak that Lormo could not recognize him, Pedro came in and looked at the boy.

"So you want to join us?" he said.

"I do," answered Lormo.

"You have escaped from prison!" continued Pedro, scrutinizing the garb of the youth.

"I have."

"Be careful," whispered Cardinas in Pedro's ear; "make sure he is not a spy."

Lormo looked at the cloaked figure.

"I wish I could see his face," he thought. "I believe he is Cardinas."

But the latter now passed on and soon left the apartment.

"You will swear to serve us faithfully if we take you?" continued Pedro.

"I will."

The boy was then made to take an oath, which he did in a firm voice.

At the same moment a noise was heard of footsteps and voices approaching, and a minute later several smugglers entered, dragging with them a man in the garb of a Vigilante. The latter looked pale and frightened. Lormo was sure he had never seen this person before.

"Who have we here?" queried Pedro.

"A Vigilante—one of the cursed people who are trying to hunt us down," was the answer. "We found him lurking outside of our grounds."

"What shall be the fate of this man?" inquired Pedro, addressing his band.

"DEATH!" replied the smugglers in chorus.

"It is well. Prepare for your fate!" said the leader of the gang, turning to the Vigilante.

"Have mercy!" groaned the latter, piteously. "Remember I have a family dependent on me for support."

"You must die. Having discovered the location of our rendezvous, you cannot be let off to tell where it is."

"For God's sake, spare my life!" cried the Vigilante.

"You waste your breath," cried Pedro, sternly. "And you," turning to Lormo, "shall be his executioner. Here is a chance for you to show your zeal in our cause. Take this," he added, presenting a dagger to the boy, and stab the prisoner to the heart."

Lormo felt his blood run cold. He was asked to murder one of his own friends, as it were.

"I did not engage to kill people," he said. "I took you for smugglers and robbers."

"You have sworn to serve us in any way we might require."

"And the oath included murder?"

"It is so understood."

"I do not like to kill any one," said Lormo, shuddering.

"The penalty for refusing will be death!" cried Pedro. "You will be cut to pieces if you disloye."

Suddenly the boy's eyes flashed. He compressed his lips firmly, and then said:

"Very well, I will do it!"

The Vigilante was held firmly by several of the gang.

Lormo raised his knife, aiming it at the breast of the prisoner, and sprung toward him.

Ere he could strike; however, Pedro seized his arm.

"Enough!" he cried. "This was done to try you! I see we can rely on you!"

Lormo returned the dagger to the speaker.

"I have hoodwinked him nicely," thought the boy. "I saw a look exchanged between him and the pretended Vigilante, and that showed me just how things were."

The man who wore the garb of a Vigilante, now divested himself of the uniform, revealing attire similar to that of the rest of the gang.

Meanwhile, Lormo looked about him in vain for his friend, Robert Brown.

"He is not here, that is plain," mused the lad. "Can it be that they have killed him. It is likely I will find out before long."

CHAPTER XII.

A STARTLING VISION.

THE custom-house officers and the Vigilantes vainly searched for the secret retreat of the smugglers.

It was now believed that the boy, Lormo, who had not been seen by his comrades since he parted from them, had been killed by the outlaws.

The truth was that the lad had found no chance to leave the rendezvous since he entered it.

Cardinas had informed Pedro of Lormo's disappearance, and he shrewdly advised him to sharply watch the youth who had lately joined his band.

"Who knows but that he may be Lormo himself," he remarked. "He is about the size of that fellow."

"But then he is almost black; and, again, we have tried him."

"You mean about that pretended Vigilante!"

That, I own, looks as if he is all right, but he is a sharp fellow, and may have guessed that you were playing him a trick. As to his being black, it is easy to make the skin that way with a burnt cork. Have you seen him wash his face since he joined you?"

"No, but he shall do so this very day before me. If the black does not come off, I shall have no doubt of his being what he appears to be."

This conversation took place two days after Lormo's disappearance aboard Cardinas's vessel—the St. Mary.

Before night, Pedro returned to the rendezvous.

Not seeing the black boy, he inquired for him.

"We sent him to our craft to help work her," said Bronson—the Englishman—Pedro's first officer.

"Why did you do that? I told you I did not want him to leave the place, alone."

"He has not left it alone. There are three of our men with him."

"That alters the case; but I shall be glad enough to see him back here."

At that moment Lormo, with his companions, was about a mile from the rendezvous, approaching that part of the coast off which the Maria, Pedro's craft, now lay at anchor.

The boy watched for a chance to escape, but the three men with him kept close to him.

Finally they drew near a small, stone house, about half a mile from the city. This house was a sort of tavern, the proprietor of which was well known to the outlaws, from whom he had received many a bottle of smuggled wine.

"I am thirsty," remarked Lormo.

"So am I," said one of the men. "I always am when we get near that house."

"A little wine would not hurt any of us," continued the young detective.

"No, indeed, but old Bosco, who keeps that place, will not trust us any more. He has a long score against us, already."

"I am willing to treat," said Lormo, rattling some silver in his pocket. "I don't drink myself, but we can go in, and you can call for what you want at my expense."

"That's fair enough," was the reply.

With Lormo the three entered the Casino. It was getting dark, and a lamp had been lighted.

The boy sat down on a bench, while his companions called for what they wanted.

The moment their backs were toward him, Lormo darted through the open doorway. The men had just raised their glasses.

"Hold, there!" cried Bosco. "I think you said your black friend would pay! He has run out!"

"The deuce be has!" ejaculated one of the three, in consternation, but they all gulped down the liquor ere they darted off in pursuit.

"Pay me first!" shrieked Bosco, but he shrieked in vain.

Away went the trio, the dim form of the fugitive faintly visible in the gloom, a few yards ahead of them.

They did not guess the truth, but thought that the black boy had merely played them the trick of running off so as to escape paying for the wine.

"Come back, there, or we'll break your head when we catch you, you little imp!" shouted one.

Lormo, however, kept on. Closely followed by his pursuers, who were good runners, he finally found himself on a projection of land, hemmed in on three sides by the water.

"This is bad," he muttered. "No chance now for me to get to the city. But there is the light of a craft ahead, and I hope it may prove to be a friend—one of our custom-house boats."

He sprang into the water, and struck out for the light, which was not more than forty yards off.

Ere long he could dimly make out the hull and mast of the craft, which was a sloop.

"I believe it is the smuggler-craft, the Maria, after all!" he thought.

He approached the vessel cautiously and finally gained the bow unperceived. At the same moment he heard a hail from the shore. "Maria. Ahoy!"

"Ahoy," was answered from the sloop.

"Send us a boat, and look sharp for a black boy who has just escaped us and must now be somewhere near the sloop!"

Lormo hastened to clamber into the bow and crouched in the knighthead.

He heard the sound of a boat being lowered. As soon as it was gone, he climbed over the

vessel's rail, having first made sure there was no watch forward, and skulked down the fore-hatchway which was open.

"Good, so far," he thought. "My next move is to swim ashore and get to the city, after the boat comes back."

In half an hour the boat returned and Lormo could bear the voices of his three late companions on deck.

He waited in vain for a chance to leave the vessel. The men remained near the fore-hatchway and finally he heard the hatch as it was put over the opening and fastened.

Preparations were being made for getting under way. A couple of hours latter the boy who had ensconced himself behind a pile of canvas, heard Pedro, with his gang, come aboard.

His angry voice rung sharply through the vessel when the three men informed him of the escape of the black boy, and Lormo could hear what was said.

"Everything is lost!" cried Pedro, "with that boy!"

"It is likely he was drowned," answered one of the men. "The last we saw of him he was in the water."

"If he was the person I think he was, he is too good a swimmer to be drowned. I now believe that he was Lormo, the custom-house detective in disguise."

"Oh, no. I think you must be mistaken! He was just what he seemed."

"Why, then, did he run away from you?"

"Merely to escape paying for the wine."

"Pooh! he would not have taken so much trouble for a little silver. You may be sure he was a spy."

"Well, then, even if he was, I am confident he was drowned. There are sharks in plenty off the coast, and I believe he has been nabbed by one of them."

"I hope so. If not, our rendezvous is as good as discovered."

The craft now was under way.

In a few minutes Lormo could feel her rolling and rocking violently, which indicated that she had been struck by a gale.

"Light 'O!" suddenly shrieked a man, who had been put on the lookout.

"Wherew'ay?" shouted Pedro.

"A couple of points abaft the weather beam, not half a mile off!" was the answer. "Santa Maria! it comes from a LIGHT-HOUSE!" added the speaker, a moment later.

"No," said Pedro. "Impossible! That light comes from the 'Black Rocks,' and there is no light-house there!"

The captain said this as he emerged from the cabin, but the moment he reached the deck and took a keener survey of the light, he drew back with a cry of horror.

"God help us! THERE IS A LIGHT-HOUSE THERE, BUT THERE NEVER WAS ONE ON THOSE ROCKS BEFORE! What can it mean?"

Lormo heard those words.

"I must try to get a look at that light," he muttered.

He crept cautiously forward, and entered the forecastle through an opening in the bulkhead.

There was no one there, all hands being now on deck. The boy ascended the ladder, and looked through the scuttle-opening.

The wind was blowing a gale, and the night was very dark, except when it was now and then relieved by a flash of lightning. Looking toward the "Black Rocks," Lormo saw the light which had been alluded to. Soon an electric flash revealed to him an object projecting from one of the rocks.

"Sure enough, there is a light-house!" he muttered, in astonishment.

At the same moment he heard a cry of surprise from the crew, who were collected around him.

By the gleam of a lantern in the rigging, he could see Bronson and Pedro gazing toward the singular vision with pale faces and wild eyes. The young captain shook in every limb with superstitious horror.

What could it mean—the presence of that light-house on those rocks, where it had never been before?

Pedro clutched Bronson's arm.

"It is near the very spot where we drowned Henrique and Jason!"

"Pshaw! what has that to do with it?" said the Englishman, who was not quite so superstitious as the other.

"It is a sort of judgment upon us!" gasped Pedro.

"Nonsense!"

Nevertheless he was much agitated by the sight of the singular apparition, as there cer-

tainly seemed to be something supernatural about it.

"See! the light moves!" continued Pedro, as it was seen swinging to and fro.

"It is strange enough!" cried Bronson. "When we come this way again we must lower a boat and go there."

"I will never go there!" answered Pedro, shuddering. "Besides, the strong surf near that rock is apt to break any boat to pieces."

"I can go near enough, at any rate, to look into the mystery."

As the sloop receded further and further from the rocks the light gradually disappeared.

The mist and rack of the storm now hid the PHANTOM LIGHT-HOUSE from view.

CHAPTER XIII.

SUSPECTED

LORMO returned to the hold, where he again ensconced himself behind the canvas. A couple of hours later the gale subsided. Not long after, the young detective could hear the rattling of the cable, as preparations were being made for anchoring the craft. The creaking of cart-wheels fell upon the boy's ear. He again made his way up the forecastle scuttle steps, and, cautiously looking through the scuttle, he saw lights ashore—not twenty fathoms off.

"I must look into this thing," thought Lormo.

He glided on deck unseen by the men, who were busy preparing the boats for lowering. Looking over the rail from behind the windlass, which, in the gloom, served to conceal him from the gaze of the sailors, he beheld a couple of wagons, loaded with cases—evidently of wine.

"Ho! ho! my fine fellows!" thought the lad. "You will not find it quite so easy to get those things into the city as you did the others—that is, not if I can prevent it."

He was about to return to the hold when he saw a boat coming round the bow. This boat must have been pulled with muffled oars, as he had had no warning of its coming. Ere he could retreat from the rail, some one in the stern-sheets held up a lantern, the light of which flashed full upon his face.

He at once recognized the features of Cardinas, who also saw the boy.

"I must get away from here, now," thought the latter.

He was about to move toward the other side of the rail, when he beheld Pedro approaching.

The lad then crouched behind the windlass.

"Is that you, Captain Cardinas?" inquired Pedro, advancing to the rail.

"Yes. I came to tell you to keep as near to the coast as you can, and to show no light, as I have passengers aboard who may suspect something."

"Passengers?"

"Yes, Don Carlos and his daughter, waiting for me to sail in the morning. They are going back to their mansion."

"Are they not below? Would they be likely to see me? And even if they did, would they suspect that I was a smuggler whom you were allowing to pass you?"

"The deuce take them, yes. Don Carlos is suspicious at all times, and although he was below when I came away, he may be on deck when you pass, as he has kept popping up out of the cabin ever since coming aboard. The moment he should see you he would want me to speak you, and might even take a notion to board you, with his daughter, and she would be sure to recognize you as the person who attacked her the other day."

"True enough; and even if I could keep out of sight, the old fellow would probably scent something wrong, as he is very sharp, or else he would report having seen me, and finally learn that I had not received the custom-house inspectors."

"Of course he would."

"So, my fine Captain Cardinas, I have you in a trap, at last!" thought Lormo. "Your game is up now for certain."

"You think Don Carlos will not see me if I buzz the shore!" continued Pedro.

"Not if I can help it. By the way, I see you have your black boy aboard. Keep your eye on him, as I warned you before. I don't like his looks. Just now, when I saw him, there, at the rail, it seemed to me that some of the black had disappeared from his face, leaving it a little streaked!"

Here Lormo abrugged his shoulders and crept along nearer to the opposite rail. Cardinas had spoken in a low voice, but the boy had good ears and had heard every word.

"You are mistaken," said Pedro. "The

black boy has escaped from us. He ran away from some of my men ashore, about five hours since."

"I tell you I saw him—either him or his ghost—not ten minutes ago, by the rail where you now stand!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes—as sure as that I now see you."

"The little imp must then have swum to the vessel and got aboard without my knowing it. This must be looked into."

"I will help you search for him. After what you have told me, I feel certain that he is that rascally Lormo in disguise."

As he spoke, Cardinas, seizing the fore-chains, lightly sprung aboard.

Lormo climbed over the opposite rail and dropped into the water, but not before he had been seen.

Cardinas was back in his boat in a moment, and heading it for the other side of the vessel, he pursued the swimmer and overtook him ere he had proceeded far.

"Bring him aboard!" shouted Pedro, as the lad was hauled into the boat.

"Let us have a good look at you, my fine fellow," said Cardinas, as several of the men held the boy down on his back.

Enough of the black had now, owing to his submersion in the water, left his face for the captain to recognize Lormo.

"As I thought!" he cried. "Pedro!" he added, raising his voice, "it is that rascally imp of a detective, after all."

"Bring him aboard!" repeated Pedro.

But even as he spoke, the noise of another boat approaching was heard, and to the consternation of Cardinas, he saw that it contained Don Carlos and his daughter.

"Captain Cardinas!" cried the merchant: "what is the meaning of all this? I see wagons ashore loaded with goods. I fear that things are not exactly right here. Your first officer told me, when I came on deck, and asked for you, that you were not aboard at present, and that was all I could get out of him. I saw the lights ashore, and at once concluded you had gone to investigate the matter."

"You were right," said Cardinas.

"Seeing the lights, I feared that smuggling was in prospect, but I find that I was mistaken."

"I have come on purpose to hear about it," said Don Carlos. "Your officer would not take me in one of his boats, so I concluded to take myself," and got into one alongside, with my daughter, who insisted on going with me. As you see, I have sculled the boat this way. You say there is no smuggling intended. I must own that to me it looks like it. What vessel is this, near which we now are?"

"It is the Maria—a fishing craft. The things you see ashore, are cases of wine destined for the house of Martinez & Co. in Tampico."

"Humph! those fellows I have heard, are not over honest. You are sure the wine is not to be smuggled?"

"Certainly. I have looked into the affair, and found it is all right."

Meanwhile Cardinas had whispered to a couple of his men, who, in spite of Lormo's struggles, held the boy down in the bottom of the boat, while one kept a hand over his mouth to prevent his crying out.

"So you are sure it is all right?"

"Yes, sir, I am sure."

"What is that commotion in your boat? you have some one there a prisoner, have you not?"

"It is nothing. My men are 'skylarking' that is all."

"A strange time for sport, it seems to me."

As he spoke Don Carlos sculled his boat toward the other.

"Give way!" said Cardinas, in a low, quick voice to his crew.

All except those who held Lormo down, then took to their oars, and soon the boat, leaving Don Carlos many yards astern, was alongside of the St. Mary.

In a few minutes Lormo was dragged aboard of the craft, and thrust into the hold.

When Don Carlos arrived, he found Cardinas and his men hauling the boat round toward the starboard gangway, looking as if nothing unusual had happened.

"Why did you pull away from me?" inquired the merchant. "You might have waited and taken my daughter and me into your boat."

"I thought you would like the exercise of sculling, as you said you did."

"I don't like too much of it," answered Don Carlos, panting.

He and his daughter were soon after below in the cabin.

A few hours later the St. Mary got under way and stood to the southward.

It was not quite dawn when the vessel passed within about two leagues of the "Black Rocks."

"Is not that a light?" inquired the first officer, pointing toward the rocks.

Cardinas, to whom he spoke, uttered a cry of surprise. Then he looked through a night-glass.

"Santa Maria!" he cried. "There is a LIGHT-HOUSE there! What can it mean?"

The first officer, looking through the glass, also saw the object.

"There never was one there before," he said.

Cardinas turned pale. He thought of Henrique and Jason—also of the reports which he had heard of the "Black Rocks" being haunted.

Although not so superstitious as Pedro, still he was easily alarmed by any apparently supernatural event.

He stood watching the light until a thick mist finally hid it from view.

He could think of little besides the PHANTOM LIGHT-HOUSE, which certainly was a strange mystery.

A few hours later the breeze fell away to a calm. As the wind had been very light, the St. Mary was still not more than seven miles from the "Black Rocks."

"We will go there to look into this strange vision we saw," whispered Cardinas to his first officer.

A boat was lowered, and the young captain was soon speeding toward the rocks.

When he was within half a mile of them the fog cleared. There was the white surf rolling and breaking as usual over the rugged masses, which now, at high tide, were mainly under water, but there was no sign of the PHANTOM LIGHT-HOUSE—that strange vision which had been seen on the night before!

Cardinas shuddered. There certainly was something supernatural about the affair, and it occurred to the villain that perhaps the apparition had appeared, and would again appear, to mark the spot where his and Pedro's two victims, Henrique and Jason, with weights attached to them by chains, had been buried into a watery grave!

CHAPTER XIV.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

In the hold Lormo vainly struggled for some time to free himself from his bonds. At last, however, his hands, as he rolled over, came in contact with the edge of a piece of iron, which he concluded by the feeling was the blade of an ax. He tried to bring his cords over the edge of it, and at last, he was successful.

Drawing the ropes to and fro until they parted, he first severed those about his wrists. Then he unfastened the gag from his mouth, after which he untied the rope around his ankles.

He advanced toward the forward bulkhead, but he found no opening here as aboard the other craft. Turning, he went to the after bulkhead, which, aboard this craft, separated the hold from the cabin. Here he found a door, tightly closed and locked. He fancied he heard the breathing of some person on the other side of the partition. He pressed his ear to the boards and listened. Finally he heard some broken words, evidently uttered by a girl.

"It is the merchant's daughter Isabel, talking in her sleep," thought the boy. "This part of the partition separates me from her room. Now, can I make her hear me?"

He picked up a piece of wood, the fragment of a broken block, and rapped gently on the partition. In a few moments a gentle voice inquired:

"What is that? Who is there?"

"It is I—Lormo, the detective."

There was a slight cry of surprise, followed by the noise of the girl leaving her berth.

"Make no noise," said Lormo. "I am here a prisoner," and he went on to explain.

"You shall be saved," answered Isabel. "Now that I know you are there, no one shall harm you."

"Have you the key of the door?"

"The key is in the lock," was the answer. "I will let you in."

She unlocked the door, and the boy entered her room.

"You say that Cardinas tied you and put you down there in the hold?"

"Yes."

"What was his motive?"

"He did not want me to tell tales. Doubtless he is only waiting for a chance to make away with me. I have discovered that he is in league with the smugglers—that he assists them for the sake of a share of the profits."

"Can this be true? Can it be that the one who acted so nobly in rescuing me from the thieves, is such a villain, after all?"

"It is my opinion that that rescue was a planned affair. He rescued you from the very man with whom he is in league!"

A light seemed to break upon the girl's mind.

"I don't know why it is—but that thought occurred to me more than once. I have known Cardinas

since he was a boy, and have heard of his being guilty of many mean and despicable actions."

"Believe me, señorita, a greater villain does not walk the earth."

"I think so, too now."

"I am sure that he slandered Robert Brown—that the boy did not join the smugglers of his own accord, but was a prisoner among them."

"I don't know," said the girl, coloring. "I have thought that it must have been so. Now, then," she added, quickly changing the subject, "you must escape from this vessel."

"Yes, and I request you not to say a word to Cardinas or any other person of what I have told you, for that would enable him to escape me, and I wish to lay my plans for his capture. Believe me, he knows what has become of my friend, Robert Brown, who is not now among the smugglers, and when he is a prisoner, and not before, will we be able to force him to tell where the boy is—if indeed he be alive."

"How will you get ashore?"

"Is not there a boat, alongside?"

"I don't know. I will go and see."

Isabel then went on deck. She soon returned, to report that there was a boat alongside, under the counter."

"And who is on deck, aft?"

"Cardinas and his first officer. They are on one side of the deck, and the boat is under the other."

"It is dark is it not?"

"Yes, very. You could easily get into the boat without being seen by the two on deck. The man at the wheel would not see you either, for there is a piece of canvas hanging from the wheel-house, and it would hide you from him."

"Then I will go at once. Many thanks, señorita, for your kindness."

He ascended noiselessly to the deck, and as Cardinas and his first officer now were busy examining the light on the "Black Rocks," he contrived to slip unseen into the boat alongside, the same one which had been used by Don Carlos.

Unfastening the boat, the boy allowed it to drift off some fathoms in the gloom, ere he used the oars for sculling.

Two hours later, just at dawn, he gained the shore, within half a mile of Tampico.

It was not until after Cardinas had gone to investigate the strange affair of the Phantom Light-house, that his first officer missed the boat which had been lying under the counter.

At first he thought the warp-rope might have become loosened from the pin, but, on questioning one of the men, he learned that it had been too securely fastened to give way.

Now a suspicion that Lormo had escaped crossed his mind. He opened the hatch, and, entering the hold, found that the prisoner was not there. The pieces of parted rope lying near the ax, showed him how the boy had freed himself, but he could not imagine how he got out of the hold.

The moment Cardinas returned he informed him of what had happened.

The young captain was much excited over the event.

"We should have made away with the fellow, last night, Bango," he said. "Now he will go to the authorities, and tell everything!"

"But how do you think he got out of the hold?"

"In my opinion, either Isabel or her father had a hand in helping him off."

"Then they must now know everything."

"I fear so."

"What are we to do?"

"They must not be allowed to go ashore on this coast."

"You don't mean to make prisoners of them?"

"For the present—yes. We must go to some out-of-the-way place, disband our crew, and burn the craft."

"You are right. I am afraid it is all up with us, now. Who would have thought that such a mite of a boy could have caused us so much trouble?"

Half an hour later, as Isabel was preparing to come up, she found her door locked. Don Carlos also found himself shut up in his room. He pounded at the door and shouted, but no attention was paid to him.

"How long is this accursed calm going to continue?" said Cardinas, impatiently, as he looked around him.

"It may last all day," was Bango's consoling reply.

Suddenly, glancing at the barometer, Cardinas clapped his hands.

"We are going to have a gale," he said.

"If it only comes from the right quarter, it will be good for us," answered Bango.

Both anxiously watched for signs of the gale.

All at once, heavy black clouds were seen in the south and west.

"It couldn't have been worse," said Cardinas, gloomily. "The wind may drive us ashore."

Roaring and shrieking, the gale, soon after, pounced upon the craft.

At first she was driven straight toward the "Black Rocks." But, by dint of hard work, the young captain contrived to weather them. As the sloop went rushing past the white breakers, he fancied he heard a strange, wild cry coming up from the roaring waters. Bango heard it, too, and both men exchanged glances.

"Curse the place, it is haunted!" cried Cardinas. "That cry sounded as if it was from one of those drowned wretches! The sooner we get away from here, the better!"

Bango shook his head.

"It is a bad sign," he said. "First that Phantom Light-house, and now that ghostly cry. We are doomed!"

"Stop your croaking!" exclaimed Cardinas, but he was as pale as death, and he trembled in every limb.

The gale raged for hours. Finally, Cardinas contrived to run the sloop into a bay, where headlands sheltered her from the wind, and dropped anchor.

It was now afternoon, and the young captain ordered a good watch kept.

"I will blow up the craft," he said, "sooner than have her fall into the hands of the custom-house officers."

Pedro also had been obliged to seek shelter for his craft, the Maria, in a bay below.

He went ashore with Bronson to see if any government cutter was in sight. The two ascended a promontory, but no sail could be seen through the drifting fog and rack.

All at once Pedro clutched Bronson's arm and pointed to where the mist had for a moment lifted from one of the "Black Rocks."

The young smugglers uttered a cry of superstitious terror. Revealed, for a few seconds, in a transient, lurid gleam of sunlight, there it was again, that wonderful PHANTOM LIGHT-HOUSE.

CHAPTER XV.

THE CHASE.

LEAVING the boat, Lormo hurried to Tampico, and soon reached the custom-house, where he described his late experiences to his chief.

A cutter named the Petrel, provided with four guns, and a good crew, was kept in readiness for service, near the dock.

Orders were sent to her captain to get under way, when the gale blowing shoreward came up, with clouds of driving mist and rack, putting off her departure.

"How long is this going to last, Captain Bancos?" inquired the boy, Lormo, who had come aboard to join the expedition.

"For some hours. You had better go and get some sleep while we are waiting."

Lormo went below, threw himself into a berth, and, in spite of his late exciting adventures, he was soon in a profound slumber.

In the afternoon the wind changed, and the cutter was got under way.

Lormo was on the alert. He climbed to the mast-head, to scan the waters and the land along shore.

"What do you see?" cried the captain.

"The weather is foggy, but I see two vessels, standing to the south. I can't make them out very well, but I suspect they are Pedro's craft, the Maria and the St. Mary."

"Good!"

As much sail as she could carry in the wind now blowing, was put upon the cutter. She was a swift craft, with a bow like a needle and a clean run.

She gained upon the vessel astern, which was discovered to be Pedro's.

The latter was heading straight for the "Black Rocks," and the gathering gloom of night almost concealed her from the gaze of the watchers.

"He is going to run his craft on the rocks!" cried Captain Bancos.

"Don't be too sure of that," said Lormo.

In fact the Maria now was seen to sheer away from the rocks, and head further out to sea.

Bang! went a gun from the cutter's bow.

The smuggler paid no heed to it, but sped on.

Another shot whistled on its way from the cutter, and the Maria's topmast went by the board!

The crew of the Government vessel cheered.

"We have the fellow, now," cried the captain.

"It is so dark, I cannot see him," said Lormo, peering through the gloom.

The cutter kept on, for many hours, backing and filling, but no sign of Pedro's craft was discovered.

"Light 'O!" yelled the man on the lookout.

Sure enough, there was a lantern, apparently shining on the "Black Rocks," which were about a mile abeam.

"The rascals have sunk their craft, and taken to the boats," said the captain, to his first officer, Porsino, "but they have stoven on the Black Rocks, and are signaling to us for assistance. It may be a ruse, and they may show fight. Clear away the quarter-boat and man her with about twenty men!"

Lormo buckled a cutlass to his waist, and thrust a pistol in his belt. With the armed crew of the boat, he also sprung in and took his place forward.

"Give way!" was the order, and the boat seemed to fly.

As it drew near the rocks, a cry of surprise escaped Porsino—the officer in the stern-sheets. The cutter had sent up a rocket, which describing a curve, went hissing far above the boat, lighting up the sea for some distance. In this transient glare, a light-house was distinctly revealed on one of the "Black Rocks," and from this shone the lantern which the crew had mistaken for a signal from the smugglers.

"Did you see it?" inquired the boat's officer of Lormo.

"Yeg, but not for the first time. I saw it from the smuggler's craft last night. It appears to be a PHANTOM LIGHT-HOUSE, for there never was one there before!"

"How is it that you said nothing to us about this wonder?"

"Because I thought you would only laugh at me, and so that it was best for you to see it yourself."

"What can it mean? There is something supernatural about it!"

"So it seems."

"Santa Maria protect us!"

The crew had heard what was said, and, turning, as a second rocket went flashing up into the air, they

also saw, by the ghastly gleam, that PHANTOM LIGHT-HOUSE on the Black Rocks!

Instantly, with cries of superstitious horror, they stopped working their oars.

"Pull ahead!" yelled the officer.

"No! no! The light-house! the light-house!" was uttered by many terrified voices.

"Fools, I am not going *there*!" said Porsino. "There are those smuggler rascals, now, pulling along shore."

As he spoke, he pointed toward the coast, on the left of the "Black Rocks," and whirled the boat's head round in that direction.

The crew pulled with a will, and the boat rapidly gained on that of the smugglers.

When within speaking distance, Porsino shouted:

"Hold up, or it will be the worse for you!"

The smugglers' boat, almost a barge in size, and crowded with men, had evidently been injured while it hung from the davits of the sloop, by one of the shots fired at the vessel, for several of its crew were busy bailing it out. Pedro suddenly folding his arms, ordered his men to stop pulling.

A minute later the cutter's boat came sweeping alongside of it, and Porsino pointing a pistol at the head of the smuggler chief, ordered him to surrender.

"We cannot do otherwise," answered Pedro, gloomily, as one of his foes now lighted a lantern, revealing a swivel in the bow of the Government boat, with a man by it, ready to discharge it at the outlaws, in case they offered resistance.

"You are wise there," said Porsino. "We could cut you to pieces in a few minutes."

"It is all up with us, I suppose," said Pedro. "A cursed prison for us now."

"Ay, my man, and the gallows, too," cried Porsino, "for we have learned from Lormo that it was you who drowned the two young fellows, Henrique and Jason, near the 'Black Rocks.'"

Pedro turned pale and cast a spiteful glance at Lormo.

"Own that it was you who pretended, as a black boy, to join our band."

"I own that cheerfully," answered Lormo. "Now, then, be so good as to tell me what you and Cardinas have done with my friend, Robert Brown."

"He escaped from us, and we afterward learned that he was drowned while with my sister aboard a damaged craft, which was wrecked off the 'Black Rocks.'"

"Who told you that?"

"Cardinas."

The news of his friend's loss surprised and saddened the boy.

"You say he escaped from you. So then he did not voluntarily join your gang?"

"No. We could not persuade him to do that, although my sister tried hard to induce him to become one of us."

Lormo felt much relieved, for here was positive proof that Cardinas had slandered the youth to Isabel and her father—that he had been true and faithful to the last.

"What do you think is the meaning of the light and light-house yonder?" inquired Porsino of the smuggler, as Pedro's boat, with its crew as prisoners, were being towed toward the cutter.

"God only knows," answered Pedro, turning very pale. "This is the second time that strange vision has appeared there, and I knew from the first," he added, gloomily, "that it boded us no good."

The band were finally aboard the cutter, ironed and in the hold. When asked what had become of his craft, Pedro said that he had scuttled and sunk her.

"Captain Cardinas was ahead of you. Have you any idea of his destination?"

"No. He will escape you. His vessel is a swift one, and you can never overtake him."

"We will see about that," was the reply.

The cutter was kept on in pursuit of the St. Mary which could no longer be seen through the gloom.

All at once, however, the voice of the lookout was heard:

"Sail 'O' right ahead!"

The cutter's captain sent up a rocket, and by the gleam the St. Mary was discovered not half a mile off, with only half of her mainmast standing.

The truth was, Cardinas, in his eagerness to escape, had crowded too much sail, which had resulted in the loss of his topmast.

A shot was sent toward the fugitive craft, which sent back one in return.

"Curse the fellow's impudence! we will give him all he wants!" cried the commander of the cutter.

Bang! went another gun from the latter, to which Cardinas replied by sending a well-aimed shot at his pursuers.

This shot passed through one of the cutter's port-holes, and Bronson, Pedro's first officer being in range of it, received the

A search was made for the St. Mary's crew, but they could not be found, although one of their boats was discovered near some rocks ashore.

"They have run off, but they cannot long escape the law. They will be found before many days," said the captain of the cutter.

"Hark!" said Lormo, who was in the boat with the captain. "I thought I heard a voice, ashore."

Seizing a lantern, the captain sprung to land, followed by Lormo, but he had not proceeded many steps, when two forms were dimly seen approaching.

They soon were near enough for Lormo to recognize Don Carlos and his daughter.

"Thank God! we have escaped the rascals," cried the merchant, as he came up.

"So you know now, señor, that Captain Cardinas is a villain?" said Lormo.

"One of the blackest kind," answered Carlos, emphatically. "Just before blowing up his vessel, he set Isabel and me adrift in a small boat, which I had the greatest trouble to prevent from capsizing. At last, as the wind was toward the land, we struck the shore, a few hundreds of yards below here, but we might have been drowned in so rough a sea."

"I hope now, father, you do not believe any of the statements which Cardinas has made against Robert Brown," said Isabel.

"Humph! I don't know. It seems he was seen with the smugglers. You saw him yourself."

"Yes, but I believe he was a prisoner there."

"It has been proved that he was!" cried Lormo. "The chief of the smugglers has been captured, and is now aboard the cutter. He will tell you about it."

"And is Robert there, too?" inquired the merchant, eagerly.

"No," replied Lormo, sadly. "I wish he was."

"You have learned what has become of him?" said Isabel, turning pale.

"He has been drowned," replied the boy.

"Drowned!" gasped the young girl.

She staggered so that her father feared she would fall.

"What is the matter, Bell?" inquired Don Carlos. "Why should the news of Robert's fate affect you in this manner?"

With a powerful effort the girl recovered herself.

"It was so sudden," she gasped.

On the way to the cutter she said not a word.

Both Isabel and her father were kindly treated aboard the vessel, which now headed for Tampico. From Pedro Don Carlos learned all the particulars of the robbery of his warehouse. The detestable villainy of Cardinas, from first to last, was thus brought to light.

When the merchant returned to the deck, he found his daughter there listening to Lormo's account of Robert's fate as it had been related to him by Pedro.

Ere he could say a word, the voice of the man on the lookout was heard:

"Light 'O!'"

"Ay, there it is again—that light on the Black Rocks!" cried Porsino.

"You say you saw a light-house there?" remarked the captain.

"Yes, sir, not only I, but Lormo and all the men saw it, too."

"A light-house?" said Don Carlos. "How could that be? Come, there must have been some mistake!"

"No, sir, there was none," answered Porsino. "So many eyes could not have been deceived."

"What does it mean?"

"God only knows, señor! It must be a PHANTOM LIGHT-HOUSE!"

Don Carlos laughed incredulously.

"Such things don't happen nowadays," he remarked. "How far off is that light?"

"As we are now a good way out at sea," answered the captain, "it is about five miles off."

"Could you not send a boat to look into the affair?"

"My men would be afraid to go."

"I will go with you," said the merchant.

"And I will go, too," rejoined Lormo.

"Be it so," answered the captain.

He headed the cutter toward the rocks, and when she was within half a league of them, he lowered a boat provided with a mast and sail.

Don Carlos and Lormo were soon in their places.

"May I go?" inquired Isabel.

Her father consented, and she entered the boat.

The mast was stepped, the sail sheeted home, and away went the boat, bounding along on the starboard tack.

The mysterious light could not now be so distinctly seen as before; as the boat approached it, it seemed to become dimmer every moment. The roar of the surf dashing against the rocks was distinctly heard.

"That surf is dangerous," said the captain. "There is a whirlpool among those rocks, and so we must not go too near them."

"We are close enough to see the light-house," remarked Don Carlos. "Where is it?"

The captain held up his lantern, which shed a lurid glare over the rocks, but no light or light-house now was visible!

CHAPTER XVI.

PRISONERS.

"This is very strange!" cried Don Carlos. "There certainly was a light here."

"Yes," answered the captain. "You will now own that there appears to be something supernatural about the affair."

"It does seem so; but I have no doubt the thing will be explained in time."

"I believe we have been drawn into the surf!" cried Isabel, in alarm.

The captain sprung to the sheet and slackened it. "Pull—pull for your lives!" he shouted.

Don Carlos could handle an oar. He and Lormo pulled manfully, but the boat could make no head against the whirling rush of white water. All at once, with a crash, the frail craft struck a rock and capsized.

Isabel clutched a spur of the rugged mass near her and drew herself upon it. She heard the voices of her father and his companions, but she could no longer see them, as they had been swept, with the overturned boat, from her sight.

"Help! help!" she called. "Save my father!"

In her excitement, she forgot that she could not be heard by the people, so far off, aboard the cutter.

Meanwhile, Don Carlos, Lormo and the captain clung to the capsized boat.

"My child—my Isabel is lost!" cried the merchant, who, in the gloom, had not seen her climb upon the rock.

Lormo, however, had been near enough to the girl to catch a glimpse of her form as she drew herself up by the projecting spur.

"She is safe," he said, "on one of the rocks."

"Thank God!"

"We may find it hard to save ourselves," said the captain. "We cannot right the boat, which you can see is going down as it fills."

"How far are we from land?" inquired Don Carlos.

"About a mile. Can you swim?"

"A little."

"If we can once leave this current, then, which is drawing us toward the whirlpool, we may contrive to reach the shore."

They soon let go the half-sunken boat and struck out for the land.

Lormo and the captain, on each side of Don Carlos, helped him to get out of the current, which was not very strong at this place.

"I am afraid I cannot keep up much longer," said the merchant, when he was still about half a mile from the shore.

The captain, having slightly sprained his arm when the boat was capsized, was unable to afford him any assistance.

"Cheer up, señor," said Lormo. "I will do my best for you."

He was a good swimmer, and he exerted himself bravely to help his companion.

At last the three, in an exhausted condition, reached the shore.

"Can you not signal the cutter?" inquired Don Carlos.

"Yes; we can make a fire with drift-wood, and light it."

Some drift-wood was soon after collected, and the fire was lighted with a match from the captain's waterproof safe.

Before the blaze could spread, however, about half a dozen men rushed from behind some rocks, near the beach, and while one of them stamped out the fire, two others pointed pistols at Don Carlos and his companions.

Held firmly by some of the gang, the three could not have offered resistance even had not the charges in their pistols been spoiled by the water during their swim.

"Follow us, or we will blow out your brains," said one of the men.

"These are Cardinas's fellows," remarked Lormo.

"We have got into a hornets' nest."

They followed the ruffians, who led them to a thicket about half a mile from the beach.

In a hollow there were some more of Cardinas's crew, and the young captain himself was there.

"Ho! who have we here?" he cried, as the gang appeared with the prisoners.

"Rascal!" cried Don Carlos, as soon as an account of the capture had been given, "what are you going to do with us?"

"Have no fear. We will not harm you, but these other two wretches must die!"

"You would not dare to kill them!"

"Yes, I would," answered Cardinas, coolly; "and that I will do, unless the cutter's captain promises to wait three days before sending the hounds of the law upon my track!"

"I will not consent to that," said the captain, spiritedly.

"Then I will kill you, and this little wretch, too!" cried Cardinas. "Now, men!" he added.

A ring of raised cutlasses gleamed about the heads of the captain and Lormo. But the two stood firm.

"Will you promise?" continued Cardinas.

"No!" both the cutter's commander and Lormo answered, simultaneously.

Cardinas made a sign to the gang, who replaced their weapons, which it was evident they had so threateningly raised only to force the two to make the required promise.

The hands and feet of the three prisoners were now bound with cords, and they were dragged into a small cavern, the mouth of which was then hidden with branches and leaves.

"It will be more than three days—perhaps a week, before you are found, as few people pass this way," said Cardinas. "Had you given the promise, I would have set you at liberty."

"Villain!" cried the enraged Don Carlos. "are you going to leave us to starve?"

"Here are your rations," answered Cardinas, as a man thrust a small bag of sea-biscuits into the cave. "You cannot use your hands. You will have to eat as the pigs do. Good by, Don Carlos!"

And with these words, the youth turned away, laughing, and the receding footsteps of himself and companions were heard.

"I will have that heartless scoundrel arrested if I have to search for him to the ends of the earth!" cried Don Carlos, enraged. "I am so sorry this has happened. It will give the fellow a chance to make good his escape."

"When they perceive that we do not return, my men will send a boat for us," said the captain. "They will look for us till they find us."

Hours passed, but no sound was heard to indicate the approach of any person to the relief of the three.

Meanwhile Lormo, by working his arms and legs vigorously, had contrived to draw himself out of the cave. He had so loosened his cords by these movements that he was able to creep still further, and finally he arrived upon the edge of the hollow.

He looked seaward, but to his surprise he could no longer detect the light of the cutter. A strong wind was blowing shoreward, and it finally occurred to him that Porsino had stood further out to sea to give the shore a wide berth.

"He will wait for a change of wind before he approaches the coast again," thought the boy.

The sky was now overcast, and an hour later, flashes of heat lightning darted along the clouds.

Suddenly Lormo uttered a cry.

"What is it?" inquired the captain, from below.

"The mysterious light and the PHANTOM LIGHT-HOUSE again!" answered Lormo.

In fact the strange apparition was again become visible on the "Black Rock."

Neither the bonds of Don Carlos nor of the captain had been very tightly drawn. They exerted themselves for some time, and finally gained the boy's side.

"Sure enough it is a light-house!" cried Don Carlos, in amazement, as a flash revealed the apparition on the rock. "What can it mean?"

"I hope we will learn in time," said the captain. "Unless it is really, as it appears to be, a supernatural affair, we certainly will be able to solve the mystery."

The three watched the singular spectacle of the Phantom Light-house for some time. At length a gathering mist hid it from their view.

"Your men have not come to look for us, yet," remarked Don Carlos.

"No, but we will probably see them in the morning. The wind is this way, and Porsino has been obliged to give the coast a wide berth."

Now and then the three made efforts to work themselves clear of their bonds, but without success.

"I hope Isabel has not come to harm," said the merchant. "By the way, as she is on the "Black Rocks," she must have a good view of the PHANTOM LIGHT-HOUSE, as you call it, and will probably be able to tell us something about it. Perhaps she has been able to get close to it—near enough to touch it."

"If it is a phantom affair, of course she would not be able to do that," said the captain. "I long to see her to hear what she has to say about it."

"I suppose she would have been able to reach it from her position?"

"That depends on where she is. If she is on the end of the chain of rocks, at the extremity of which the vision makes its appearance, I think she might reach it by stepping carefully."

"I am worried about her. Remember we have not seen her by the flashes of lightning, which I think should have revealed her to us."

"The rocks have many hollows. Probably she has kept behind some ridge, which has hidden her from us."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE METAL TOMB.

As already stated, the damaged pearl-divers sloop, when it struck on the "Black Rocks," in the gale, parted amidships. Between the gap in the riven timbers, the diving-bell, held in an upright position by the rope attached to the main-boom above, went down in the roaring waters.

"Halloa! what a racket!" muttered Robert, when he heard the crash of the breaking craft, and felt himself descending with the bell.

Through the glass windows on each side of the upper part of the instrument, he could see the dark, green waters of the ocean, and multitudes of long, black weeds, which were swaying about like living creatures. All at once, the bell stopped. It had evidently landed upon an under-water rock, not many feet beneath the surface.

"Good!" cried Robert. "I don't believe I've gone down far enough for the top of the bell to be submerged. It will be seen by some passing craft, I hope, when I will be helped out of these narrow quarters. Poor Berta! I wonder what has become of her! I fear the girl has sacrificed herself for me."

He called, thinking she might hear him if she had saved herself, but there was no reply.

Suddenly he uttered a cry of horror. Through the glass window he beheld an enormous shark darting past with

ried away, had been driven and jammed into a cleft, in a rocky hollow, so that the part to which the hose was attached was raised, keeping the rubber tube, so that the wind entered its mouth.

Before long, however, the mouth-piece was blown to one side, and was also choked up with particles of sand and weeds. Then the boy was nearly stifled.

His brain seemed to whirl, his vision became dim, and he knew that he was suffocating. Suddenly his gaze fell upon a pronged piece of iron, on the shelf, where it had evidently been placed for the use of the divers. Seizing it, Robert struck vigorously with the blunt end, one of the glass lenses or windows, which, as stated, were in the upper part of the bell, and which remained above the surface of the water, the apparatus not having sunk far enough for them to be submerged.

The boy's efforts were finally successful. He succeeded in breaking the window—in making a small opening in one part of it, and thus obtained a constant supply of fresh air. He was unable, however, to enlarge the opening, as the pronged iron was now bent nearly double.

He felt very thirsty, and, from a water-keg which was on the shelf, he took a deep draught, after which he helped himself to a couple of biscuits.

"Thank fortune," he muttered, as he passed his hand over his vest; "through all my trouble, I have contrived to keep possession of Don Carlos's precious package."

Hours passed. The boy became drowsy, and, in spite of his efforts to remain awake, he fell asleep. When he opened his eyes and recalled past events, he looked about him in surprise.

"What does this mean?" he muttered. "I am still in the diving-bell, but I am no longer under water!"

In fact there was light enough outside, although it was night, for him to detect the line of rocks extending along the sea, and also the surface of the water for some distance. Afar off he could even see the light of a passing vessel!

"Halloo! what mysterious power has all at once lifted the diving-bell from under the water?" he cried aloud.

As he reflected, however, the truth broke upon him.

"I understand," he muttered, with a smile. "It is now low tide, and as all of the bell was not under the surface, the water receding from it, has left the whole of it exposed. This is good for me! Surely the bell will be seen, and I shall be taken out."

Then he remembered that it was night, and that probably the craft whose lantern he could see through the glass windows of the bell, was not near enough to detect the instrument in the gloom.

Suddenly a cry of joy escaped him. He remembered that Berta had put a lantern in his quarters.

"I will light it, and no passing craft can help seeing that signal," he thought.

He placed the lantern near the window, and taking matches from a safe in his pocket, he lighted it.

"Ho! ho!" he cried. "Here is a patent light-house! I shall be seen before half an hour longer!"

But he waited in vain for his rescue.

When an hour had passed, he began to think that for some reason, owing, perhaps, to the mist or to the clouds of spray flying up from the surges near the rocks, neither the light nor the bell could be seen.

While still hoping that he was mistaken, and that aid would yet reach him, he resolved to explore his quarters. The receding of the tide had left under him a dark cavity, on the edges of which the bell rested, for its mouth had descended directly over this hollow in the rock, which at high tide was full of water.

"The cavity cannot be very deep, and I will lower myself into it," thought the boy.

There was a small coil of rope near him on the shelf, and, attaching one end of this to a hook, he fastened the other part about his breast under the arms. As already stated his wound was not a very severe one, and, thanks to the care Berta had bestowed upon him, he now suffered little pain. Without much difficulty he therefore lowered himself into the cavity with his lantern over one arm. The hollow was about six feet deep, and in one side of the rock, near the top, there was a crevice which would admit the water when it should again rise.

As he looked about him, he was suddenly startled by the horrible spectacle of two ghastly skeletons in a rocky rift, which held them nearly upright, side by side!

They were in one corner of the cavity, and as Robert took a nearer view of them, he perceived that heavy iron weights were attached by chains to their legs!

Instantly it flashed on his mind that these were the skeletons of Henrique and Jason, drowned by Pedro among the Black Rocks. "Yes, it must be so," muttered he. "These are all that remain of those two unfortunates, who were sent by Don Carlos, a year ago, to probe the mystery of the warehouse robberies."

There was nothing else of interest in the cavity, and after the boy had gazed for a long time at the unsightly objects he had discovered, he seized the rope to climb back to the shelf of the diving-bell.

It was, in fact, full time he should do so, for the water was rapidly rising, and was trickling through little openings in the rock.

In less than an hour after he had reached the shelf of the bell, the water had risen to within a few inches of it. It came up no further, for the shelf was about on a line with the surface of the sea outside, at high tide, the bell having sunk about two-thirds of its length ere it lodged on the under-water rock.

The waves, however, kept breaking over it, and Robert could hear them roar and hiss around him.

"I wonder if any one would hear me if I shouted," thought the boy.

He called until he was hoarse, but there came no reply.

One circumstance made him uneasy. He knew that there were breakers and a strong surf outside of the line of rocks, and he feared that no boat would venture near enough for its occupants to hear his voice. Through the window he could see long masses of black sea-weed, which seemed at high tide to hang about that part of the bell which was above the surface.

"I hope the weeds do not hide the top of the bell," he muttered, anxiously. "If they do, no person would perceive the instrument, but would suppose that it was merely the summit of a rock rising above the water."

It was low tide again at about two o'clock the next day, and Robert saw below him, as before, the cavity over which the mouth of the bell rested.

Something resembling smoke now rose from it, and the boy knew it was the fog, which was very thick outside, finding its way through openings in the rock.

"I had hoped that the bell would be seen in the daytime, but it seems I am doomed to disappointment. No person can see it in the mist."

The tide was up again at dusk. After munching some of his biscuit, and taking a drink of water, the youth fastened one end of his line about his breast, so as to make sure he would not fall from the shelf, and dropped to sleep.

He must have slumbered until the next ebb of the tide, ere he awoke, for he could now plainly see through one of the windows, the lantern of a boat some fathoms off.

He called, hoping to make himself heard, but instead of approaching, the boat rapidly receded.

"Oh, when will I be taken from this place?" he cried, impatiently.

He kept his lantern burning until near dawn, when, the tide having again risen, he put out the light, which could not have been seen through the thick masses of weeds hanging outside over the windows.

To his chagrin, this day also proved to be foggy, but he hoped it would clear up on the next.

When night came, and the tide again fell, he re-lit his lantern.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CONCLUSION.

At the time when Isabel, Don Carlos's daughter, clambered up on the rock, after the boat in which were her father and his companions, had capsized, as described, the tide had just reached its highest level.

The young girl ascended to the summit of the rock, and peered through the gloom, vainly looking if she could see some sign of the overturned craft and its occupants.

Unable to do so, she gazed in the direction of the cutter's light.

"If I could only make a signal!" she cried, despairingly, "but that cannot be done here, in the dark."

Soon after, the wind came on to blow almost a gale toward the rocks, and the fair watcher saw the light of the cutter receding.

She crept along the rock, and finally reached another in which there was a hollow sheltered from the wind and spray.

Here she sat down, feeling very uncomfortable in her wet garments, with her back resting against the side of the rugged alcove.

This alcove faced the further extremity of the chain of rocks, over which the girl could see the spray and the breakers, as they swept high up on the jagged masses.

Hours passed when, all at once, the gleam of a lantern directly ahead of her, near the end of the line of rocks, caught her attention.

She called, thinking the light was that of some boat from the cutter, but there was no reply.

"They do not hear me on account of the roar of the surf," she thought, "but, as the tide is falling, I think I can creep along to the light."

She found it very difficult to make her way over the slippery rocks, covered, in many places, with long, trailing masses of seaweed, and finally she paused, hesitating whether to proceed or not, for she could now perceive that the light, which she had supposed was a boat's, appeared to be stationary, and resembled a great round red eye glaring angrily at her from the water.

"Can it be that this is the eye of some sea-monster?" she muttered. "I have heard of luminous fish—but no," she added, quickly. "No fish could look like that!"

The eye seemed to grow larger, and gradually the girl could make out, by the lurid glare, the upper part of something resembling a light-house!

As the tide continued to fall, the form of the light-house showed more distinctly until every part of it, looming up from the top of a rock, which the ebb of the water had left bare became visible in the gleam of the lantern!

"Yes, there it is!" gasped Isabel in surprise, and not without a feeling of superstitious terror. "There, sure enough, is that PHANTOM LIGHT-HOUSE!"

For some time she stood gazing toward the singular apparition, not daring to approach it to obtain a nearer view.

Suddenly the lantern moved, and, peering through the window facing her, the girl now beheld a human face.

She saw it only for a moment; the next, a thick mass of fog drifted about the light-house, almost hiding it from her gaze.

"I will solve this mystery!" cried Isabel, who al-

though not entirely free from superstition, possessed a very resolute spirit."

She crept along toward the vision, and when within a few yards of it, she fancied she heard a cry.

"That voice sounds familiar," she thought, "although it is partly smothered."

She was soon close to the object, when, the fog having drifted to one side of it, she again obtained a view of it.

As it was but a few yards from her, she could see it plainly enough to perceive that it was not a light-house, after all, but merely a huge diving-bell.

At the same moment the face again appeared at the window, now near enough for Isabel to recognize it in the bright light.

"Robert Brown!" she cried.

"Who calls?" came the voice of the boy from the inside of the bell.

"It is I—Don Carlos's daughter!" she cried, in clear, ringing tones, which could not fail to reach him.

"Thank God! then I shall be taken out at last!" responded Robert, "and your father will get his packet of money, which I have here safe with me!"

"How did you come in this situation?"

The boy made a full explanation through the glass window.

"The wonder to me," he continued, "is that the bell has not been seen before, as I have lighted the lantern every night since I have been here. I suppose your father is near, with some men. Please to call them."

The girl now explained about the accident.

"I think my father has been saved," she added, anxiously, "for he could swim a little, and those with him were good swimmers."

"I have no doubt of it, if Lormo was with him, for he is like a fish in the water, and is a brave boy, too. Yes, señorita, you can be sure that he is safe!"

"If so, I am glad that the accident happened, since it has been the means of your discovery. Seen, at low tide, rising from a rock, the diving-bell looks larger than it really is, and has the appearance of a LIGHT-HOUSE. I don't believe any sailors could have been tempted to go near it, as they imagined it was a PHANTOM LIGHT-HOUSE, and were terrified at its appearance."

The girl remained near the bell until dawn by which time the rising of the tide had completely hidden it from view.

Although only two-thirds of the bell was under water yet, when the tide rose, a rift in a rock near the instrument, was filled, causing a huge mass of seaweed to stream out and hang over it, thus concealing it, and giving it the appearance of being merely the top of a rock, projecting from the surface of the sea.

The wind had now changed, and the girl saw the cutter not a league distant. Looking toward the land, she saw another spectacle which gave her great joy—three human forms evidently seated on a rising point of land. These persons, she rightly judged, were her father and his two companions.

She signaled the cutter with her kerchief, and half an hour later, Porsino, with a boat's crew, arrived, to hear, with surprise, the story of the diving-bell. In another hour Don Carlos and his companions were also picked up, and freed from their bonds.

The merchant on hearing explanations, was much pleased with Robert's courage and fidelity.

Before night, with the help of tackles and ropes, brought to the rocks, just at the ebbing of the tide, the bell was hoisted sufficiently for its occupant to crawl out from under it.

Robert's first movement was to rip open the lining of his vest and present to the merchant the valuable packet he had so long kept there.

"You are both brave and honest, and I think more of you than ever, my lad!" remarked Don Carlos.

"He is as true as steel. I always said so!" cried Lormo.

The party returned to the cutter, which now sailed for Tampico.

A week later some of Cardinas's crew were arrested, but their captain escaped. A few months afterward, he died of yellow fever in Cuba.

Don Carlos finally took Robert Brown into partnership with him, and permitted him to woo Isabel, who eventually became his bride.

She had long loved him, and her father had at last wisely concluded not to keep the young people apart.

We have to add that Robert's experience in the diving-bell and his previous adventures are often mentioned on the Mexican Gulf coast, where they have won for him the appellation of "BLACK ROCK, THE SMUGGLE SPY."

THE END.

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